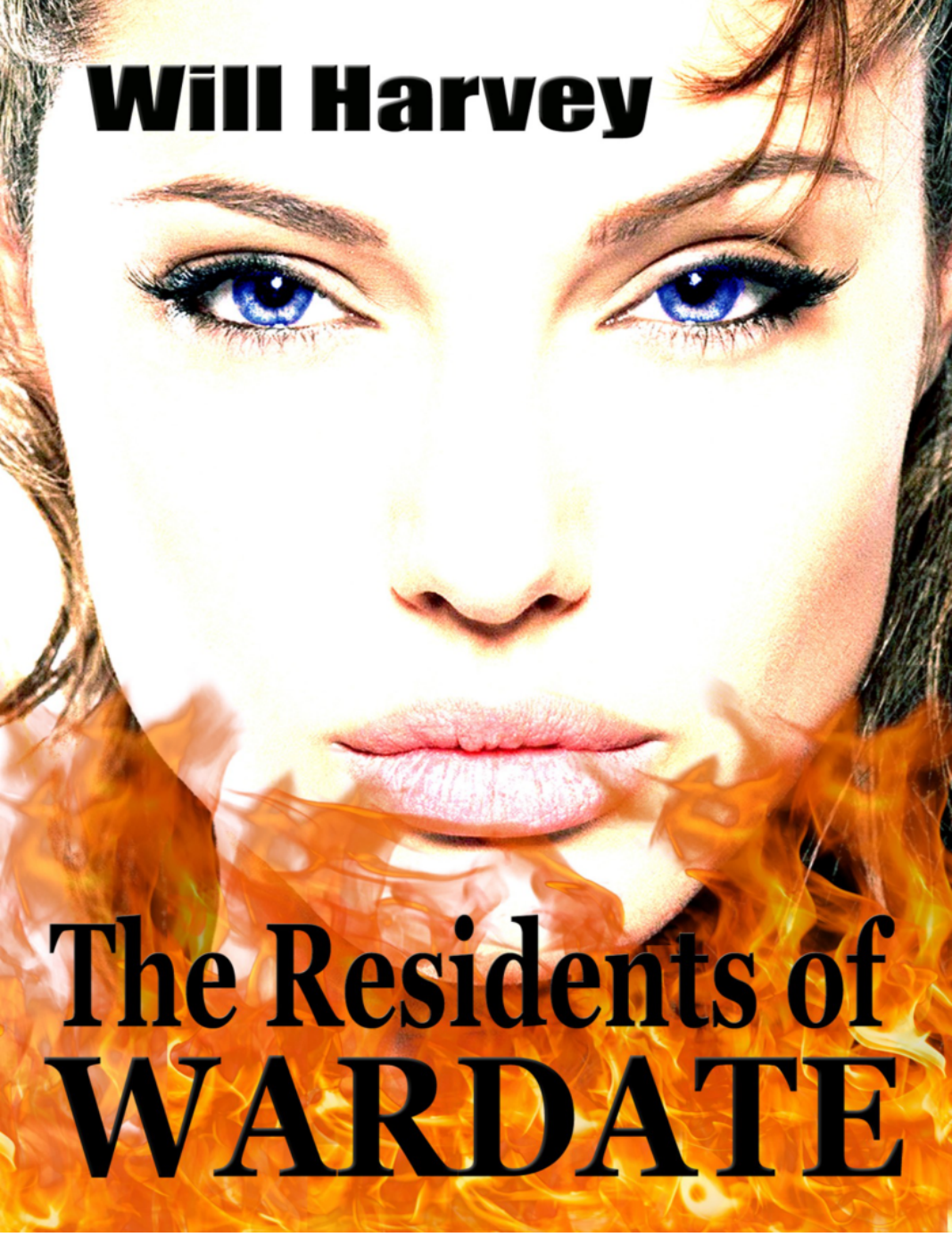
Will Harvey
The Residents of
WARDATE

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For Lynda

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The Residents of Wardate

The first part

By Will Harvey

Residents of Wardate – *A gathering of the most evil, reviled people on Earth.*

1. A nice person to know

This story is all about Poppy Cock, only her, absolutely no one else.

Outside, the rain was hitting the artificially lit pavement with the force of a jet wash. The wind chill factor was freezing the joints of the vermin in the overfilled wheelie bins and the passing vehicles aquaplaned skilfully along the rain-soaked street. However, this was completely irrelevant.

Inside, through the dirty etched windows of the Black Bull, if anyone cared to look, a young woman could be seen sitting on her own in the gloomiest corner of the empty lounge. In every respect, a pretty young woman but no one would ever know. Her long hair discreetly hidden and her beautiful face shadowed by a precisely placed black head scarf. This was also irrelevant, however, this particular woman carried Poppy's mind and soul within and that was relevant.

Exactly why Poppy should choose to spend her time here, alone and withdrawn, was known only to herself and the person she had become. On this particular evening, the bleakness of her depression perfectly matched the mood of the weather outside, although to blame the weather for even a morsel of her misery would be a travesty.

Despite the ear-splitting, repetitive melodies and monotonous flashing lights from the one-armed bandit right next to her, she had effortlessly switched off all her senses and journeyed inattentively inwards.

When attentive, Poppy despised the nicotine-stained walls and ceiling, the beer-stained carpets and the heavily worn brown leather furniture. She had no intention of warming to the atmosphere or socialising with the clientele but it was altogether better to be here than in her quiet, lonely, empty flat. Here she could hide from the world, be as depressed as she felt fit and avoid getting tangled up in other people's affairs. On the list of priorities right now was to drown inconspicuously in her sorrows.

She had killed a total of four people up to now: three intentionally and one by accident. Certainly, there was no feeling of remorse for what she'd done but definitely no enjoyment either. She was aware that she had changed but hoped it wasn't into a monster, that really would be ironic. She tried hard to hold on to her old virtues but in

truth, after all that had happened to her, her grip had weakened. All she could say is that she *used* to be a really nice person to know.

So… why *did* she return to this dreadful place night after night? Surely there was more to it than just despising her flat. Perhaps she was waiting for someone. If true, she had been waiting an awfully long time. Perhaps it was a special place because it held a special memory, begging the question, exactly what, in a dump like this? Anyhow, overshadowing these minor uncertainties, there were far more pertinent questions whizzing about in Poppy's secluded conscious: For instance, why had all *this* happened to her, why had she suddenly become redundant and why could she kill *again*, for a bag of pork scratchings?

She cast her mind back to when it all began, almost one year to the day.

2. Date with a satellite

Before Poppy was this antisocial, depressed, hungry killer, she used to love the simple things in life, things like her mobile phone for example. Certainly, she was aware that it was just a small slab of rare metals and plastic arranged in such a way to perform fundamentally as a communication device. However, over the weeks that she had owned it, it was something that had developed some sort of soul and therefore a friend. In its little brain it had memorised hundreds of her favourite music tracks, thousands of photos from its inbuilt camera and above all it was a telephone giving her a priceless link to home. Naturally, there were other things in life that she loved such as fashion, warm sunny days, nice food, hot baths, shopping, fast cars, yoga, being the centre of attention and two people: One was her mother who she thought the world of and the other was her boyfriend, Adam and what they did together. That was definitely another thing she loved.

What she didn't love were hot, dry countries, stuffy hotel rooms, polyester sheets, cockroaches, gunfire and being a long, long way from home, but unfortunately, this was in her job description. Other things specific to her job description involved performing as a foreign news correspondent. Most days were awful but one particular day was really, really awful. Besides being awful, it was a day when her life changed for the worst, forever. The memory of it was all too vivid to forget.

That day began as usual, with her mobile phone doing one of its important jobs – acting as an alarm clock. To do this, as is the way with things with souls, it was enjoying being *slightly* annoying. A minute later, *slightly* had developed into profanity of the worst sort. 'How can such a small device,' she thought, 'produce such a loud, irritating, penetrating sound?' An old conventional alarm clock would have been tossed across the small drab hotel room by now but certainly not her lovely, slim, pink electronic friend. The annoying noise from the alarm function coincided with a heavy banging on the hotel room door and a muffled shout from the corridor outside. She had no choice but to wake up.

'Pops!'

‘Okay, okay, I’m up!’ she shouted in a dry husky voice.

She hated the shortened version of her name. She hated the long version too but at least that was a nice red or orange or yellow flower, not a fizzy drink or a granddad. She fumbled with the ridiculously tiny buttons on her phone and simultaneously with the slightly larger buttons on her pyjama top. By luck more than skill, the alarm stopped, making way for the noises of the traffic, the rantings of the locals and occasional distant gunfire outside her hotel room.

‘I don’t have to remind you, we have a date with a satellite in one hour,’ the same cheerful male voice bellowed from outside the room.

‘Yeah, yeah, see you down in the lobby in ten,’ replied Poppy in her blue and beige sexy silk pyjamas as she drew back the hideous blue and Black patterned curtains in her stiflingly hot, orange and brown hotel room.

Even though she was about to go live on a TV link to England in front of millions of viewers, if needs must, ten minutes was more than enough time to make herself adequately presentable. Her dark brown eyes contrasted against her pale blemish-free skin dispensing with the need for any makeup. Her tall slender but shapely body looked good in the simplest items of clothing and a quick brush of her thick brown hair rectified any defect resulting from a restless night’s sleep. She so wanted to wake up in a civilised way, sipping a cup of tea in bed, watching the breakfast news for at least an hour then doing a spot of yoga on the rug until nicely supple and refreshed but for five reasons, she couldn’t: She had overslept and didn’t have time. She had a pounding head. Her hotel didn’t provide tea-making facilities. There was no television in the room and there was no rug on the hard-tiled floor.

The reason she had a pounding head was directly attributable to the night before. Her companions, Simon and Bob had collected together various unidentifiable bottles of alcohol. They assumed it was some kind of vodka as it looked like water but it wasn’t, tasted not dissimilar to high octane petrol but it wasn’t and gave off vapours like Tiger Balm but it wasn’t. Because of this, they suspected that there would be some unpleasant consequences.

Yes, they had every good reason to celebrate. Straight after the link-up, they would be heading home to wonderful England, away from this hellhole of a war-torn township and away from this once but not now, luxurious hotel. Poppy would be going back to the people she loved most in the world: Minnie, her mum and Adam, her sweetheart.

For three weeks she had been covering recent unsettling developments

in this part of middle Africa.

It was part of the world that was void of oil so the rest of the world's governments left the insurmountable problems to be tackled as best as they could by charitable organisations. It was part of the world where the leader had become old and mad and employed those with no souls to be his right-hand men. It was also a part of the world where the *amount* of diseased people was disproportionate to the *amount* of drugs available.

So why was Poppy here? It happened to be a well-paid but dangerous assignment and Poppy Cock was naturally the best one for the job. It would result in a feather in her cap that she didn't particularly crave, but after all, she was probably the most experienced news correspondent for this kind of work – she simply had to go. Undeniably, she had boosted the viewing ratings (mostly male) because she literally made love to the camera. Her cheeky smile, subliminal body language and come-to-bed-eyes, travelled at the speed of light to the millions of televisions back home. This was rather inappropriate behaviour for a country in turmoil and short of just about everything but she thought, what the hell can *I* do? Africa is an awfully long way away, certainly not a place I'd choose to go on holiday to, and full of people who don't appreciate the nice sunny weather they have.

Yes, it's true, Poppy could be described as shallow, perhaps spoilt but certainly not ruined. In her defence, Poppy's life had not been without a certain amount of distress and hardship. To give perspective, her life so far, in comparison to what is to come, is largely of no consequence, however, so as not to totally dismiss this expectation, here is a whole section devoted to her early life:

She was an unfortunate child, spending many months in hospital suffering from a large spectrum of illnesses. Doctors and specialists came to the somewhat vague conclusion that she was one of two things, either a weak or just a very unlucky child. Amazingly, by the age of nine, after years of high temperatures and countless courses of antibiotics, she emerged healthy, strong and almost indestructible. With her physical setbacks out of the way, it was now the turn of her mental strengths to be tested. At nine and a quarter she lost her father to lung cancer. This left her mother almost destitute, distraught and chronically depressed. Poppy missed her father immensely but in total contrast to her mother, refused to let this inner sadness show. Her mother was subsequently deemed unfit to care for her child and taken into care – and so was Poppy. Care inevitably meant foster parents but because of her strong, stubborn character and an undying love for her

mother, she fought her way through several sets of temporary parents. Three years later, both were joyously reunited and both were now mentally stronger. Her mother studied rigorously and eventually became a solicitor. She could now afford to give Poppy the best education and grooming. Within a few years, Poppy happened to be in the right place at the right time and landed a job at the BBC.

Fortuitous maybe, but this is only the irrelevant beginnings of her life. For the rest of it, fortuitous is a word she could never use again.

As previously mentioned, she hated her name but apart from changing it by deed poll and upsetting her mother, there was little she could do about it. At one time she decided that her surname could be modified to make the 'ck' silent, making Cock, 'Co' but that was just ostentatious. No, one of the other reasons why she was so popular and well known, especially as a news correspondent, was because she *was* Poppy Cock. Often, she failed to research properly on current affairs or forgot her lines so she would fill in the time by babbling incessantly about her uncomfortable hotel room, the tasteless food, her lifeless hair and her aching feet. In other words, most of the time, she talked a load of poppycock. But that didn't particularly matter as she had one hell of a reason for it – that was her name.

3. The Thames Embankment

The best place in the world to walk at night, approaching Christmas time, in the crisp evening air, in someone's arms, has to be the Thames embankment. London has its bad points but it also has its very good points. For once she hoped that she wasn't recognised. Normally it gave her confidence a boost, signing autographs on scraps of paper but now she was in Adam's arms. They weren't long arms but they still wrapped around her keeping her warm and protected. She knew Adam's arms would not be keeping her warm or protected for quite some time after tonight. Now they were no longer walking but capturing the moment – capturing their feelings. Adam's arms now held her tightly as his lips warmed Poppy's.

'Be good while I'm gone,' said Poppy softly.

'I will restrict myself to just one woman a night, perhaps two on a Saturday,' said Adam wearing a cheeky smile.

Poppy feigned an escape from Adam's arms hoping he would increase his grip on her.

'Please yourself. Plenty of men where I'm going, not to mention Simon and Bob,' teased Poppy.

'Simon and Bob? You may have noticed, they're my dad's age but fatter and balder… and they wear cardigans!' said Adam.

'Cardigans are cool,' replied Poppy, factually.

'…As are the Hush Puppies and thick socks they wear when it's a hundred in the shade?'

They decided to resume walking and be quiet for a while, absorbing the moment, not wanting time to move, the river to flow or mobile phones to ring but Poppy's did – she ignored it.

'May have been someone important,' said Adam.

'It was, it was Mum.'

Poppy understandably did not want her mother in her mind at this particular moment in time. Her thoughts revolved around Adam, a king-sized double bed, soft music and chocolates. Adam was a gentleman who would never be so presumptuous, although he did

have a box of Belgian chocolates ready under the bed, back in his hotel room.

Adam was some sort of engineer from Bristol. Poppy, as we know, worked in television and came from Ipswich. They met at a mutual friend's wedding, fell instantly in love with each other, got married and had twelve children. Well, apart from the latter two facts, all perfectly true but there was plenty of time yet, for dreams to come true. It may have appeared a strange arrangement, meeting either in London or Bournemouth but never in their hometowns, Bristol or Ipswich, but it was what they both agreed to for convenience. Adam was used to Poppy working in far-off parts of the globe but the situation on the African continent was worsening daily. Every time Poppy went off on her assignments, it became longer, more dangerous and much better paid.

Because he loved her more than words could say and wanted to live the rest of his life with her, Adam had a question to ask Poppy. It was linked to a little square red box in his pocket…

4. The proposal

‘Going down to the foyer, wait for you there,’ shouted the same voice from behind the hotel room door.

‘Two minutes,’ Poppy shouted back.

Adam’s proposal still made her smile every time she thought about it – how he went down on one knee in a puddle and then asked her, in front of several passers-by. The ring was absolutely stunning: white gold with a single large diamond, sparkling quite beautifully in the sodium streetlight above. Yes, he messed up the words slightly but Poppy got the gist of his request. *Popping the question to Poppy* should have flowed easily off his tongue but nerves slightly got in the way. She instantly agreed, initially to get his knee out of the puddle but mostly because she loved him and wanted his children…

Then suddenly she was ready, showered, dressed and packed but had no idea how she had arrived at this point.

5. Madeline's first day out

It was Madeline Bull's first day out and, on all accounts, it was a beautiful April morning. The sun's rays pierced their way through the gaps in the tree branches, not yet covered in leaves. She accepted the flashing effect of the sunlight, not as an irritation, but as one of life's many delights. Today she had a simple task to do: drive to Tesco, buy a sliced wholemeal loaf of bread and a one-litre bottle of semi-skimmed milk.

For many, this would seem a simple act but for Madeline, it would be an entirely new and substantial achievement – if she could pull it off. New sights, sounds and an independence that most take for granted would bombard Madeline's senses like never before.

She didn't realise it but she was being observed. Her driving skills were proficient, almost textbook. Maybe she should have been aware of the same car following her all the way but to Madeline, she was no car expert, one car was exactly like another. She parked perfectly in a free space as near as she could get to the store entrance. She locked the car with the remote and then collected a trolley from the pound.

The person following her had also parked his car nearby and was relaying his observations into his mobile phone. He was clearly delighted with Madeline Bull's somewhat apparently normal behaviour. Hastily, he got out of his car and followed her across the car park and into the supermarket.

Madeline's first task was to find the dairy products aisle for the milk, which she did. She found the semi-skimmed milk section, selected the right size bottle and placed it in her trolley, perfect!

Madeline was purposely plain, not overly dressed but unavoidably attractive, especially to the type of men who have nothing better to do than linger on their own with an empty trolley in a supermarket. She developed an admirer who asked if she needed assistance.

'No, thanks for asking,' Madeline replied politely.

He continued to follow her.

'Sure you don't want any help, Love?!' the man was not taking no for an answer.

‘Quite sure thank you.’

‘You look as though you need some help.’

‘Look, piss off, will you?!’

The man looked at her for a second, grinned and then walked the other way.

The other man following her was delighted with her response to this harassment and relayed the events on his mobile phone.

Now for the bread: The bakery section was, as usual, across the other side of the store but Madeline was quickly on the trail. Within no time she was standing in front of the various loaves of bread with a trolley in hands. Wholemeal was identified as a brown bread with a fairly uniform crust, Madeline quickly located several examples. She checked that the labels on the loaves said wholemeal and that they were sliced – so far so good.

Then five minutes went by, she was still standing in front of the wholemeal loaves. The man observing Madeline was no longer keeping his distance but now standing a few feet away. The smugness had dissolved from his face leaving a very worried look. Another few moments went by and then Madeline started to do what the man had dreaded. She started twitching her head up and down and then from side to side as if she was looking for something that wasn’t there. As the seconds ticked by, her gyrations got more and more severe. Other customers were beginning to notice her peculiar behaviour. They began to stare, no one offering to help, after all, there was little anyone could do.

A voice came back on the mobile, *‘we didn’t tell her what size of loaf to buy! Shit! … Bring her back!’*

This was going to be tricky, if not handled correctly Madeline would at best panic, at worst collapse.

‘Madeline, we’ve decided we don’t need any bread, we have plenty,’ said the man now standing next to her.

‘Yes Mike, I understand that we have plenty of bread but do we have any *wholemeal* bread?’ Madeline spoke very precisely considering she seemed to be having a panic attack.

‘Yes, yes, plenty of wholemeal bread,’ said the man, now known as Mike.

‘But is there any particular size of wholemeal bread we don’t have?’ inquired Madeline.

‘Plenty of wholemeal loaves in every size possible,’ said Mike.

‘Then I will leave the bread and just go and pay for the milk,’ said Madeline calmly.

Mike spoke on his mobile phone, ‘she wants to continue her task and pay for the milk.’

‘No, not a good idea!’ came the reply. *‘The confusion may have corrupted her behaviour subroutine files. Incapacitate her and bring her back.’*

‘God, not again!’ moaned Mike.

He was used to carrying Madeline over his shoulder but not usually through the middle of a supermarket.

Madeline Bull was so named because of the personification of British-ness by the name Bull – of John Bull repute. Naturally, they couldn’t call her John because she was definitely all female. Many first names were considered including Teri and Cilla but Mad Bull naturally won the day and therefore, Madeline Bull it was.

6. The truly evil act

The lobby in the hotel was delightfully cool. It was the only place with air-con but they had no time to linger. Moments later they were in a minibus without any form of air cooling. Opening the windows would have helped but most were jammed shut because of the dry, dusty environment. They had a ten-kilometre drive to where they were to broadcast from. Ten kilometres on the M4 is barely worth talking about, hardly noticeable (unless it's a bank holiday weekend). However, ten kilometres in the searing equatorial desert heat on dusty un-metalled roads is 10,000,000 millimetres – a colossal journey. As there were only three of them, they all managed to get a window seat so that they could enjoy the scenery and bake at the same time.

Twenty kilometres was originally thought to be a good safe distance from the troubled areas where sanctuary could be sought and a good night's sleep could be had but now, that was no longer the case. The troubles had expanded so much that nowhere was particularly safe anymore.

Where they were going to was an area where the locals were beginning to stand firm and rebel against the tyrannical regime of the government. The government had imposed a police state and the police of this imposed state had permission to shoot. This meant, more often than not, killing any troublemakers, namely anyone the bullets of their guns randomly happened to hit. It was an extremely dangerous place to be. The three of them said very little, they knew they had a job to do. Simon fiddled with his sound equipment and Bob cleaned the lens of his camera several times. Poppy gazed through the dusty minibus window. How could human beings do this to one another? she asked herself. They passed several burnt-out cars, burnt-out homes and bullet-ridden signs. Where were all the men? Yes, there were a few brave women and young children carrying pots of water and bags of food on their overworked shoulders but no husbands, no men whatsoever. Occasionally, a few emaciated children attempted to run alongside the minibus to flaunt their anguish. This was a very dangerous act considering the random placement of landmines and IEDs, but they were desperate.

Clearly, the children had great faith in the automated land clearing machines which roamed the land, seeking out the lethal IED devices.

These machines resembled scaled-down tanks with a flailing device attached to the front. Unfortunately, when these machines achieved their goal- and found a landmine, an inactive heap of bent metal was often the result. As is the case, corners always get cut. Replacements sent in were downgraded and resembled little more than modified remote control 'big-track' toy cars. Credit where credit's due, they did exactly the same job at a thousandth of the cost. Poppy watched with amazement as, not army personnel, but young children flicked the switches on their hand-held remote controls, skilfully steering the toy cars through the land bordering the road. To the youngsters, it was a break from their tormented lives. It was great fun, especially if a car triggered a device. Unfortunately, sometimes the mine was too close to the roadside and then it wasn't just the toy car that got maimed or destroyed.

It seemed that potholes were another problem on these roads. Roadworks simply didn't happen in this country. If the hole got too big, a car would fall in, conveniently filling it, albeit with a few raised bits and rough edges. Presumably, this was what they drove over as everyone trampolined off their seats and hit their heads violently on the hard metal roof. Poppy was convinced she had mild concussion as the interior of the minibus suddenly became indistinct and Bob and Simon developed curious glowing halos. She wanted to go home now, not later, now! Sod the broadcast, sod this country and sod her job. Being with Adam was far, far more important. Simon snapped her out of this bout of wishful thinking…

'Good God, look at the state of this place, I'm sure it's worse than it was yesterday,' he said with an element of misplaced enthusiasm.

This was a sign that they were nearing their destination. Most of the homes were in ruins, the rest were boarded up. It was an area where employment was now almost non-existent and law and order didn't particularly follow any international guidelines anymore. Corruption was the best anyone could expect, but despite these lawless conditions, many hundreds of people had gathered in the centre of the town.

The minibus stopped out of sight of the crowds but close to the town centre. Even with electronic miniaturisation, the camera and satellite equipment for relaying the broadcast back home were deceptively heavy. All the kit had to be lugged out of the minibus quickly, carefully and vigilantly. A Sony PXW-Z150 video camera would fetch a hefty price on the African black market.

Poppy was first and foremost, a lady and did not carry heavy things, period. It was a good thing that mobile phones had undergone serious

miniaturisation and that present fashion dictated that small handbags were in. She stepped out into even more heat.

'God, I'll be glad to get back home,' Poppy continued her moaning.

Simon pointed to the familiar spot where they had broadcast from the day before. It was ideal as it had a raised area where they could set up their equipment and still be very close to the hub of the crowd activity.

This was Poppy's style, to be next to the people. Not at a safe distance, but almost mingling, almost taking part in, whatever the crowds of people were taking part in. They had only two minutes to satellite link-up. Bob was hastily trying to locate the satellite with the mini parabolic dish even though, according to the manual, it was supposed to be automatic. Simon was busily putting plugs in sockets, wafting flies off his face and laying cables. Poppy wasn't busy at all, nothing rehearsed and nothing written down. She had been vaguely brought up to speed with any overnight developments from a local envoy she met earlier in the Hotel Lobby. Until the moment came, she hadn't a clue what she would be talking about. It was all going to be spontaneous. This was Miss Poppy Cock's way and that's why people back home tuned in to watch her.

Just in the nick of time, Simon locked on to the Satellite signal and Poppy heard the familiar voice from morning news television, back home.

'Good morning, Poppy.'

'Morning Phil.'

'So, what kind of mood are the people in this morning? We can hear and see a fair amount of commotion behind you.'

'That's right, an excitable demonstration would be a fair description. Much the same as yesterday I'm afraid. Until the people of the area get some kind of assurance from the government that the state police will relax their barbarity, they are obviously going to stay resolute, but they will…'

'Have you heard anything yet from the government or at least some acknowledgement of the crisis? … Sorry please finish what you were saying.'

Phil unavoidably interrupted Poppy because of the annoying satellite delay.

'I was going to say that they are safe as long as they stay in very large groups like this… No, nothing at all has been heard or passed on from

the government. If something isn't done soon, this situation will become critical.'

'Exactly what are the disruptions?'

'Well, they are far and widespread, destructive and violent but you can't help having tremendous sympathy for these people.'

A cool London studio and two newscasters sitting on a cosy orange velour sofa, severely contrasted with Poppy's level of comfort. The sun was now beginning to blister down heavily on her bare shoulders and the dusty atmosphere was intensely interfering with the back of her throat.

'You don't sound like your normal spritely self this morning, Poppy… everything all right?' asked Phil, proving he had a total indifference to the seriousness of the situation.

'To be honest, got a bit of a pounder… and I'm missing the rain.'

'Sorry to hear that. I believe you're heading home after today?'

'Yes, thank God… Hang on we seem to have a development.'

Bob panned the camera away from Poppy and across the heads of the crowd to a side street at the back of the square.

Poppy continued, 'It appears that some sort of fire truck is driving into the crowds.'

The vehicle proceeded forwards towards them, into the centre of the square and into the hub of the crowds.

'Yes, it appears to have a water cannon on the roof. I can hear the pump starting. Yes, water is being sprayed over the people,' Poppy's voice went up a semitone with excitement.

'Perhaps it's an attempt at crowd control, or to cool us down. I think there's a good chance we're going to get drenched. The people are screaming… They're saying something… hang on… what are they saying Simon?'

'It's not water, it's gasoli…'

At that point, the picture and sound switched to static.

'I'm sorry we seem to have lost the connection, we will try and return to Poppy later,' said Phil in damp, cold, peaceful England.

As it happened, that would have been extremely difficult.

Phil was totally unaware of the truly awful event that had just

happened. It was horrific. By far the worst atrocity that had befallen that town, even that country. During the next two minutes, over 2000 people would perish in that town square in the most inhumane way possible.

What was assumed to be water, squirting from the nozzle on top of the fire truck, was in fact, petrol – gasoline. For a brief period, the liquid resembled water but all it took was one lit cigarette or a tiny spark to reveal the full potential of the deadly liquid. The vapour had ignited into a spectacular ball of fire almost the size of the town square. There was absolutely no escape from being burnt and very little escape from an agonisingly cruel, painful death.

No group or individual claimed responsibility for this horrific event. It was thought far too extreme for any religious sects, government bodies or terrorist groups to perpetrate. This event would certainly not improve the unrest in this part of the world.

7. The solution

‘Once again, disappointment and failure!! Forty frigging million pounds and three Madeline Bulls later and what… what the hell have we got now? A shitting android who asks too many damn questions!’ yelled Turner.

He was either foaming at the mouth or just producing an excess amount of slobber but either way, the military-dressed, bald and bearded man was clearly not happy.

‘There are simply too many variables, too many unforeseen eventualities,’ said Reynolds, defending himself and his team of four as best he could.

‘For fuck’s sake, they’ve done it with autonomous vehicles. They can cross entire deserts on their own without asking stupid questions. They don’t seize up at the drop of a hat or have stupid tantrums,’ growled Turner, being his usual nasty self that everyone had become accustomed to.

This wasn’t the first-time disappointment and failure had plagued the *Primacy Artificial Intelligence Droid team* – ‘PAID’ for short. As it happened, this was very appropriate as it was only because of the scientist’s handsome monetary rewards that had persuaded them to be involved in such an impossible project. Deep down, none of the scientists held out much hope for success. They knew the problems were numerous and most of them completely insurmountable.

‘With respect Mr Turner, artificial human beings are a whole new ball game,’ said Spencer. ‘Yes, we could do it but we would need Madeline to have the processing power and computing capacity at least a hundred times more than she has now and that obviously won’t fit in her framework.’

‘…Well not for at least another ten years,’ added Hogarth.

‘Are you saying you can’t do it then?! We’ve wasted forty million pounds on something unachievable!?’ Turner was clearly about to burst with rage.

‘We simply hadn’t anticipated the complexity of the algorithms required for a machine to behave like a human being,’ said Hogarth

and then paused for a moment of careful thought. ‘We humans are simply too remarkable, too complex to be emulated.’

‘We are trying to be Gods, do what Gods have done,’ interrupted Constable.

‘So, what are you saying? Abandon the project!?’ yelled Turner, now turning blue with rage.

A silent thoughtful pause now followed, mainly by necessity.

Reynolds broke the silence.

‘There is a possible solution to all this, something I hinted at before we embarked on this Mad… Bull project.’

Project ‘Madeline Bull’ was very ambitious, to say the least. It came about mostly because of the misunderstanding the military had over present-day technology. This was most likely because they had watched far too many episodes of Star Trek, Doctor Who and The Jetsons. Understandably, it is very easy for the non-technically minded to misunderstand how computers work and come to an entirely incorrect conclusion that computers can show signs of intelligence. However, any computer boffin will tell you that computers are not intelligent no matter how advanced or powerful they are today or will become. They merely follow a list of laid-out instructions from the programmer. It was a costly misunderstanding by the military. They wanted a machine with its own independent intelligence, neatly housed inside a flexible mobile container shaped exactly like a human being. They provided a large pot of money and thought if the pot was big enough, the impossible would be achieved.

Even Madeline Bull (3), the most advanced android yet, continued to display distinct signs of stupidity. True, Madeline Bull (3) could walk, talk and even drive a car through a busy town. She could easily buy certain items from Tesco and ward off lecherous old men. All this made Madeline Bull truly remarkable and a credit to the team. However, as the trials showed, if the programming, or in this case, the instructions were not 100% precise, the task would fail completely. The ‘brain’ would crash out, seize up and piss people off.

Why did the Military want a Mad Bull? A Madeline Bull would be free from emotions, more adept and ultimately expendable. A Madeline Bull could get right up to the enemy and efficiently destroy them without necessarily having to return. Yes, it would be a costly affair to lose a Mad Bull but at least no lives would be lost. A Madeline Bull could also infiltrate and spy on the enemy and potentially stop

conflicts before they began. That was their theory, anyway.

Madeline Bull had to be a very closely guarded secret known only to a very few senior politicians, one particular high-ranking military officer, namely Turner and a few handpicked scientists. This was the only way forward for such a delicate, devious, walking, talking weapon. If anyone asked, Mad Bull did not exist, never had existed. In fact, Mad Bull who? If ever the media found out, the project would instantly have to be destroyed and those involved, shot or sent an awfully long way from home. The way the military looked at it, uncivilised countries had suicide bombers and the civilised West, even though they didn't know it, would have a Madeline Bull – how cultured was that?

Perhaps it was a good thing that it was only a pipe dream.

The team which consisted of four scientists, three men and one woman, were Mike Spencer, Rob Hogarth, Chris Reynolds and Justine Constable. They all knew that there was little chance of success but what the hell, what a challenge, what good fun and what terrific pay – and pension! At the very least there would be a considerable benefit to the science of prosthetics. Many disabled people would eventually benefit from the groundbreaking work done by these few people.

The place where they did this pioneering work was below ground as all good top-secret places are. No daylight, no windows, no tea trolley lady and absolutely no visitors other than Turner. Above ground, in daylight, with the luxury of windows, were other floors, nine to be exact. The first floor, certainly not by coincidence, contained a prosthetics laboratory. This was a front for the deliveries of all the components and materials required for making artificial human beings. The people working in the prosthetics lab had absolutely no idea of what went on beneath them. However, they were not oblivious to what could only be described as excessive pilfering. Parts were delivered that often they hadn't ordered and then these parts would strangely disappear. Above the prosthetics lab, the other eight floors consisted of a variety of governmental departments. Departments of people who do things that apparently make the world go around and help to make Britain the great country that British people think it is. Not one single person who worked in the building above ground knew anything about the people who worked in the building below ground.

To access the top-secret basement was at times, adventurous in itself. For obvious reasons, there was no 'B' button for basement, in the lifts. Buttons *one* and *nine* had to be pressed simultaneously for three seconds and then the lift would go down further than normal. If you happened to be in the lift with someone who was not another member

of the team, you would have to go through a charade and get off on a floor you didn't particularly want. When finally, on the basement floor, there was a long dimly lit corridor to negotiate before encountering a hefty double door with keypad access. If you didn't know the four-digit number to enter on the keypad, quite simply you shouldn't be there.

Just once it happened; Spencer got confused between his home alarm number and the laboratory door number. It wasn't as if he hadn't been given a fair chance, three to be precise. He cocked up all of them and then the gas came through the vents. Six hours later he woke up in a hospital bed on a drip. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

The amazing sight of Madeline Bull (3) lying scantily dressed, on a sloping metal table, was a sight for sore eyes: Completely perfect, completely lifelike and completely lifeless.

The 'PAID' team consisted of four of the country's top scientists. Their expertise and credentials were simply the finest Britain could muster: Mike Spencer, young and good looking was the bio-mechanic. He was considerably experienced in this unique field. Rob Hogarth was the computer programming guru – prematurely aged, frail and walked with a limp. Justine Constable, the only female of the team, covered advanced prosthetics. She had a round face, short blonde hair and wore big round red-rimmed spectacles. Finally, Chris Reynolds, the artist, a man of few words, tall and bearded; the all-round genius that made all this possible.

Because of the team's advanced credentials and the impossibly high stakes, it was only right that they had the most cutting-edge, most expensive equipment available. Most devices were covered in colourful digital readouts and mouldy coffee stains. Many a wiring loom neatly linked these pieces of equipment together. There were, however, many more familiar devices around the room like pliers, screwdrivers, pens and half-eaten sandwiches. Despite the lab being clinically cold and stuffily warm, there was a friendly 70-inch television on the wall, tuned into the film channel. Most of the time, Nicolas Cage or Clint Eastwood would be gracing the screen but occasionally they would be overridden with the eyesight of Madeline Bull, especially when she was out on test.

Reynolds paused to gather his thoughts; he wanted his idea to make the most possible impact. It was blatantly clear to him and the rest of his team that, not in their wildest dreams, would Madeline Bull, the android, ever be a reality. True, there had been several working examples of their ultimate objective but they had only ever existed in

far-fetched science fiction stories. At present people still got about mostly in machines with wheels, dried their washing on a clothesline and took aspirin for headaches. Such a creation, for now, would only be a fantasy although remarkably, to their credit, they had achieved a certain degree of success.

His idea centred on, not so much artificial intelligence, but sophisticated remote control. However, they all knew of the problems associated with long-range wireless remote control. Poor reception and signal dropouts for a start. A seized-up android would surely give the game away to the enemy. A satellite link would be the preferred route but the ever-present communication lag would be a serious stumbling block. Then there is the question of signal reliability. Satellites have a notorious habit of being temperamental, losing signal, just at the wrong moment. These problems, however, paled to insignificance when compared to the problems associated with controlling the actual android. Over one hundred muscles all had to operate in unison for a realistic effect. All the senses including touch, sight, sound, pitch, yaw and movement had to be relayed to and fro. Facial expressions and body language had to be convincing enough for the enemy to be fooled… and so it went on!

Reynolds's solution consisted of amalgamating two concepts: The first was to use a device invented by a genius called Professor Braugenhau. Braugenhau had invented a way of making high-frequency radio waves travel unimpeded through matter. This groundbreaking technology allowed radio waves of a particular frequency to always travel 'line of sight' regardless of what was in the way. Hence, the time lag of a complex radio signal would only be a few milliseconds even if the transmitter and receiver were on opposite sides of the Earth.

The second concept was wholly organic.

Chris Reynolds began, 'I think I may have a solution to our problem.'

When the leader of the project had something to say, it was more often than not, worth listening to.

Reynolds continued with a slightly lowered voice, 'I think there *is* a way of using what we have achieved so far in achieving our goal. The solution, my friends, is in two parts: The first is in a bed in the severe burns unit at Cambridge Hospital and the second is to use professor Braugenhau's new invention.'

'Continue!' Turner snapped.

Reynolds went on to tell his small audience about Poppy Cock and her horrific experience. He told them how she had survived but only just,

mainly because she had such a will to live. He told them about her injuries and how her body was burnt down to her bones in many places. Officially she had 95% burns but this meant nothing. Her lungs were burnt away as were her hair and much of her face. Her eyesight and hearing had miraculously survived although this was little compensation for the state of the rest of her body. She had many months of skin grafts, plastic surgery and various other treatments to look forward to. After all that she would most likely be dependent upon a life support machine for the rest of her life.

'Between us, we have the knowledge and skills to solve Poppy's problems and ours too.'

Reynolds paused for any feedback.

'OK, explain quickly, I have an appointment with the PM in one hour,' Turner snapped again.

Turner had taken the bait. Normally, if he was going to see the PM in one hour, at least 59 minutes would have been required to preen himself and choose a suitable tie.

Reynolds's proposal was brilliant, groundbreaking and mind-numbingly complex but he knew it was perfectly possible with the scientists he had at hand. The team and to some extent, Turner, were intrigued as they listened to his description of the procedure. There would be risks, there would be buckets of blood, sweat and tears and inevitably there would have to be a considerable extension of the project budget.

'So how confident are you that you can pull this off?' asked Turner, unusually composed.

'Let's put it like this, a damn sight more than I ever have been with our current Madeline Bull project,' said Reynolds.

Turner thought deeply for a moment; he was not one for lengthy deliberation.

'OK, do it. I will make the necessary arrangements. However, let me be clear about this, only we in this room are to know about this procedure. As far as anyone else is concerned, Mad Bull is and always will be autonomous.'

With that he promptly left; he had to find a manicurist at very short notice.

And so, Reynolds's proposal was the new way forward but first and foremost, someone would have to visit Poppy Cock in hospital.

8. Wardate to blame

Poppy's friends and colleagues, Bob and Simon, perished in the human pyre along with two thousand, one hundred and fifty-seven local people. A few did survive, but like Poppy, that may not have been for the best. It turned out to be a purpose-built, radio-controlled, driverless vehicle that had sprayed out the petrol from the rooftop cannon. This made the horrendous act even more despicable. Whoever controlled the vehicle was clearly a monster, unless perhaps it was a tragic innocent accident?

No, to put it down to some sort of mistake was both lame and insulting. These types of vehicles are quite common in this part of the world, used especially for tackling dangerous fires where explosives may be sited. Remote-controlled vehicles normally eliminate the risk to life. Of course, remotely controlled fire trucks are, without exception, filled with water or foam to put fires out, certainly not petrol. Could petrol, for some inexplicable reason, have been put into the tanks by mistake? After all, petrol does vaguely resemble water, from a distance.

The consensus was that it was no accident, it was cold-blooded mass murder.

Time went by and no one claimed responsibility. It was most unlikely that it was anything to do with the government, as corrupt as it was. This would be a totally unacceptable way of controlling the crowds. All the signs pointed to a single individual acting on behalf of an especially evil kind of terrorist group. It had to be the most wicked of all terrorist groups, the most cowardly, wicked body of individuals to walk the planet.

Wardate was quickly and unequivocally blamed.

Wardate was the name for the world's most reviled organization. It embraced the most wicked, evil people from all parts of the globe and had emerged and fashioned mainly by the convenience of the internet. The Residents, the name given to the members en masse, of this evil organisation, are not terrorists – terrorists have a reason for what they

do, no matter how misguided they are. They are not devil worshipers either. Devil worshipers follow a cult. They worship the devil to be selected out from other people. A severe degree of evilness in mankind that qualifies one as a resident of Wardate is extremely rare. Pre-internet days, these usually very intelligent, wicked people rarely surfaced sufficiently to pose any serious threat to humanity. However, from historical accounts, occasionally some of these people found a tear in the net and wriggled through. Then it was only a matter of time before they caused carnage in their wake. Historical events have clearly dictated who they were.

Thanks to the internet, these people now collectively posed a serious threat to the stability of the world. Considering that around a thousand potential Residents of Wardate are scattered about the earth at any one time, they have unprecedented power in numbers. They crave abhorrence and catastrophe. Put simply, they get great pleasure from human suffering and devastation. In isolation, they are usually discovered early on in life and locked away from the general public. By means of the internet, these people have congealed together allowing a united lump of abhorrence to rise to the surface. Simply put, they are evil enough to perpetrate the most unimaginable, the most unholy acts of suffering ever experienced on Earth.

Once it had been established that Wardate, or to be precise, a Resident of Wardate was to blame, any investigation came to an abrupt end. The worst thing about the *Residents of Wardate* was that no one was completely sure who was a resident. They could be a neighbour, a colleague or even a relation. As Wardate had protection in numbers, thanks to the worldwide internet, they could hide away using their brotherhood as a shield. Admittedly it was extremely unlikely, one in many millions, that there was a Wardate member living next door to you but there was a slim chance and that was enough to frighten everyone into doing absolutely nothing about them.

An effective way of becoming a resident of Wardate would be to commit a truly evil act – the greater the evil the better. It was more or less a certainty that the human pyre that Poppy experienced was the actions of a new recruit proving him or herself to the brotherhood of Wardate.

9. The hospital visit

Justine Constable and Chris Reynolds took the bold decision and visited Poppy in hospital. It wasn't a pleasant experience, the state of her body beggared belief. She was totally unrecognisable as Poppy – more than that, totally unrecognisable as a human being. How could any person do this to another person? Did the person who did this have any remorse or guilt for the suffering he or she had imposed on so many people including Poppy? Obviously not.

Most people in Poppy's state would simply want to die, would not want to know about the disfigurement, would not want to suffer the pain. However, Poppy had inner qualities that made Poppy who she was. Poppy was a woman whose inner strength could move planets.

Dosed on morphine, she floated less in than out of consciousness. Her dreams were muddled, not knowing what was and wasn't reality. Even while she was dreaming, her ruined body would be twitching restlessly as if an inner torment was also plaguing her. She wanted to reach out to Adam, she wanted to do so many things. Her mind was overactive even though that was something her body could only dream of. In the rare instances when she was conscious or assumed to be conscious, her agonising, mutilated state encouraged her to speak to God, not that she had ever been particularly religious. Doubt crossed her mind if it was actually worth praying to be back to normal or was she too far gone even for God to fix. If she did have any future, how could she possibly look forward to it? How could Adam possibly want anything to do with her now? There was a high probability that she would lose both her arms and both her legs. Her beautiful dark, straight hair was certainly all gone. Her blemish-free skin was now charred like an overcooked chicken.

What she really wanted to do now was go back into her dreams. Certainly, the last thing she wanted at this moment in time was to be visited by two whispering strangers.

Her hearing was still as keen as ever. She heard the two people enter through the door. She knew these people were not hospital staff. She sensed them hesitate at the threshold of the room, probably in shock at the sight that greeted them. She couldn't see who they were as her eyes were bandaged up in the hope that at least her eyesight remained

intact – despite having no eyelids to speak of. For the moment, it was probably a blessing not being able to see herself, but one day she would, and that was a day she certainly wouldn't be looking forward to.

The strangers, Justine Constable and Chris Reynolds introduced themselves, dragged two chairs over, sat beside the bed and offered her, her life back. Because Poppy couldn't talk and the slightest movement was extremely painful, communication was challenging. However, all she had to do was to consent to or refuse the offer and she was able to do that by a small amount of head movement.

Although she listened intently to what they had to say, she gave almost no indication to that effect. Naturally, the offer came at a tremendous price, not only for the government but also for Poppy. Poppy Cock would have to die one way or another. If the project was successful, Poppy Cock would, in name and person, cease to exist and Madeline Bull would be born. If the project failed because Poppy's frail body couldn't withstand the extensive surgery, she would die this way too. It would be much better for her to die the former way rather than the latter but the implications were vast. All ties had to be broken; a new life meant a new life, not taking anything or anybody with her. However, all this depended on her will to live. Justine explained how she would have to endure many hours of surgery, essentially to connect her body to a machine. She would be in this machine for life. The machine would feed her, regulate her temperature, assist her breathing and automatically administer any necessary drugs. The location of this machine would not immediately be known to Poppy except to say it would be in a safe and secure place, perhaps below ground somewhere in England.

Poppy would forever, exist as the android body of Madeline Bull and that would be her new name, and that would be her new life.

Chris could have gone on for hours about all the technical aspects of the transition, but he had to restrain himself and be brief and as tactful as possible. After all, for the moment, all they wanted was a nod of consent off Poppy – which they got.

Naturally, there were a thousand questions that Poppy wanted to ask. However, the only one she particularly wanted an answer to right now was why Adam, her beloved fiancé hadn't visited her. Her mum had done, many times, but mostly, all she did was weep, leaving very little time for actual talking.

Perhaps she should forget about Adam especially now, after the offer

from the recent visitors. Clearly, she had him all wrong, he was a low-down, shallow skunk who didn't deserve another moment's thought. Love? Huh, I must have been crazy!

The truth of the matter was that Adam *had* been there almost every morning, afternoon and evening. He had been outside her room, virtually every day since Poppy's impaired form was delicately flown back to England. His time at the hospital consisted mostly of sitting, trying to be invisible and trembling. He was simply distraught, resulting in him eating very little, letting his personal hygiene go to pot and thick yellow plaque gather on his normally perfect white teeth. He would have changed places with Poppy in an instant, without hesitation. He had watched countless people enter Poppy's room and after a while, leave, with a very disturbed look on their faces. Poppy's mother, Minnie, did her best to persuade Adam to go in and see her daughter but his response was always the same.

'I will in time, don't tell Poppy I'm here.'

Minnie sympathetically understood and didn't tell Poppy. He simply couldn't draw up enough courage to pass through the door into Poppy's room. He knew about the pain and disfigurement, but he didn't know how he would cope or react to his first sight of her. How would he control his emotions? Perhaps he *was* a skunk and a coward. His torment went deep, deeper than the deepest ocean.

He watched the two strangers leave; he didn't know that they were scientists. He had no idea of the proposition they had just put to Poppy, but for some reason, these two men appeared to be in high spirits. Perhaps Poppy was pulling through. Perhaps her injuries were not as serious as he thought. Perhaps now was the right time, the right time to take a deep breath, build up courage and go in – so he did.

He only required one chair so he quietly moved the other to one side to get closer to the bed. He didn't want Poppy to detect him trembling, he didn't want Poppy to know about the random tear down his cheek, he just wanted Poppy to think he was behaving like a proper man ought to behave. Holding her, even touching her was out of the question but no matter, Poppy was there before him. Her charred, mutilated body was mostly hiding behind bandages but whatever the guise, he would penetrate through to the Poppy he remembered.

'Thought I'd better come in, my arse is getting sore sitting on those plastic chairs out there,' said Adam, doing his best to add a little cheer to his voice. 'Besides, I've read all those old *Home and Beauty* magazines, from cover to cover and I'm starting to get strange looks.

Nothing else for it, I said to myself, better go and see if she's missing me.'

Poppy's eyes couldn't cry, her tear ducts had been damaged in the fire but through a mixture of sadness and heartache, she was inwardly sobbing for the first time since her awful experience. Adam allowed himself to emotionally recover and then decided to tell her how much of a coward he was and how much he loved her.

'We will get through this together,' he insisted.

He talked and talked until his throat was sore. As Poppy couldn't reply, Adam had the floor all to himself. He talked about all the places they'd been and just about everything they'd ever done together. He knew that things would never be the same again but he kept that small insignificant fact to himself as best as he could.

Poppy knew better. For the first time, she pulled out all the stops and moved her arm so that her bandaged hand could touch Adam's. She went through absolute agony to do this simple task. Her burnt skin tore as it stretched, and blood oozed through the bandages, but it was totally worth it.

Unfortunately, Poppy knew that this was the end.

The two strangers had made this clear to her and she was fully aware of the implications. She wouldn't be able to touch, hold or communicate with Adam again. In the long run, it was best for Adam, he couldn't be burdened with a burnt-up cripple at such an early time of his life. He would quickly forget about her and move on. He would surely find another girl, fall in love, get married, have children, etc, etc, just as planned before. Poppy inwardly wept, she could never forget Adam…

This was the hefty price she had to pay.

10. Poppy's essence

It was the night of the 23rd of July when Poppy passed away. Apparently, she died in the early hours of the morning through heart failure brought on by the seriousness of her injuries. No one noticed her die and no one saw her being removed from the ward. A week later her funeral took place to maintain the charade. Hundreds of mourners attended the church and brief coverage was given on several daytime television channels. Her countless admirers were encouraged to donate large sums of money to various charities. This made the whole charade perhaps a little more palatable to the few who knew the truth. Everyone missed her to a degree but nowhere near as much as Adam and her mother. Adam decided to keep a low profile and sit at the back of the church, squeezed between two fat television personalities. Unfortunately, he was amongst people who made him feel alone in his loss, alone in his grief. He looked for Minnie, Poppy's mother, but she was obviously at the front in her own reserved space. Poppy's suffering had taken its toll on her too. She had clearly aged well beyond nature's normal pace in the past few weeks. Adam fought the tears away as the two fat TV personalities put on their best sympathetic look, just in case any cameras were zooming in on them. At the end of the deeply touching eulogy, the coffin disappeared slowly and silently into the cremator. As far as Poppy was concerned, it would have been finishing the job off properly, if it wasn't for the fact that she wasn't actually in the wooden box. No one suspected this, apart from a couple of inconspicuous individuals in the congregation.

The night of Poppy's removal from the hospital was a very highly planned event. The two strangers called again and told her that it was her last day. At some time during the following night, the life of Poppy Cock would officially end. They ensured her that she would be moved as painlessly as possible even though they knew any movement would be excruciatingly painful. This was a discomfort she would have to bear – in silence. Poppy was too frail to be drugged to induce a death-like state, so they had to lean heavily on technology. Several miniature gadgets were clipped to the leads attached to Poppy's body; including the heart rate monitor, E.C.G. and breathing machine. These gadgets were all programmed to simulate the failure of Poppy's vital functions at half-past midnight. This they did effectively. The Doctor on duty thought her body was far too frail to resuscitate, so death was

recorded at this time. Naturally, she had to do her best to pretend to be dead although this wasn't particularly difficult.

The same two strangers, who now assumed the identity of hospital porters, subsequently arrived and surreptitiously unclipped the death simulation gadgets. They carefully lifted her out of her bed, placed her on a trolley and took her swiftly down the adjoining corridors. A mock ambulance was waiting to take her to her new home. Minutes before this, a similar heavily burnt body of unknown origin, was removed from the same ambulance and taken to the hospital morgue. At that time of night, no one noticed the charade taking place and no one noticed the ambulance arrive or drive away.

Poppy Cock's life had superficially and officially now come to an end.

Regretfully it was a long journey in the fake and ageing ambulance, pushing the boundaries of discomfort beyond anything Poppy had experienced before. The vehicle was equipped with all the medical equipment necessary to keep Poppy alive but it was also equipped with rock-hard suspension, sensitive brakes and a set of draughty rear doors. Fortunately, Poppy didn't remember an awful lot about the journey and even less about arriving at the destination as her poor feeble body constantly drifted in and out of consciousness. If she had stayed in hospital, the following day would have marked the beginning of a series of operations to amputate parts of her body that were burnt beyond any hope of recovery. This is why the team had to act quickly. They wanted her body in its entirety, complete – absolutely no bits missing. It was essential that all the muscles and nerves were present no matter how charred. If any part of Poppy's body was missing, the procedure she was about to undergo would be impractical and unworkable.

It was three o'clock in the morning when the ambulance with Poppy within, finally arrived at the building containing the secret underground laboratory. An unconscious, mutilated body being taken into an unlit building in the dead of night would certainly have aroused suspicion. Fortunately, though, there was nobody about apart from one drunkard who staggered past the trolley, oblivious to everything but his bottle of firewater. He was in no fit state to hear the faint screams of pain uttered from Poppy's burnt lips.

Poppy assumed that most of the agony was now over but the torturous experience in the lift which followed would haunt her for decades. The simple fact was that the trolley, which had supported but shaken Poppy mercilessly for the past hour in the ambulance, was too big to fit in the lift. The trolley was just a whisker too long and that whisker meant she had to be manhandled into an almost upright position

while the lift descended slowly to the secret basement. Apart from this excruciatingly painful event, the horrendous journey, the cloak and dagger charade in the hospital and the arrival in the laboratory, there was little poppy would remember of all this.

In anticipation, Madeline Bull, the automaton/android/ female shaped machine, was all ready, completed, tested and waiting for occupation. Work had begun on *her* almost immediately after Turner had given the go-ahead. They used the Mad Bull (3) android even though completely new interfaces had to be built into her and much of the software of her onboard computer had to be rewritten. With the machine all ready and waiting, there was no time to waste; the many complex operations on Poppy's frail form began.

This was their mission: to remotely connect Poppy's withered, disfigured body to a super versatile, super agile, highly menacing, human resembling machine.

This super versatile, super agile, human resembling machine known as Madeline Bull was a triumph in engineering. Her appearance though, was by far her main attribute. A face has common features: two eyes, a nose and a mouth but in nature, the combination of these features can make a billion women all look completely different. If these features have what is known as the 'golden ratio', the face appears beautiful and attractive. However, scientists have long hypothesised that there is a ratio beyond the golden ratio, known as the 'Aphrodite ratio'. What was theorised as the Aphrodite ratio, was applied to Madeline's face. Madeline Bull was more than beautiful, her looks had a lasting, bewitching effect on whosoever glanced upon her. It may have been her slightly larger than normal eyes or her small cute nose but whatever it was, at the sight of her, most men instantly became enamoured and women felt inadequate. It was deemed essential that Mad Bull had the Aphrodite ratio look for reasons that will follow in due course. The rest of her body was no disappointment either, being slim, tall and shapely. She was, at the very least, a sight for sore eyes.

The pressure was intense for the highly skilled team but what an achievement if they could pull it off. Poppy would be anesthetised for as long as physically possible which was as long as her heart could withstand. Ideally, the whole process of integrating her body into the machine would be done in one go. This meant around fifty hours of backbreaking, groundbreaking surgery, to be performed by the incredibly talented team of four scientists and two enlisted highly skilled surgeons.

The first step was to establish a bio-electronic interface. The hours

ticked by while literally hundreds of nerves were located and identified on Poppy's burnt and shrivelled body. Sensors were then attached to these nerves by way of small thin, acupuncture-type needles. The sensors had the role of relaying the minute electrical impulses to a nearby machine. This machine was, in essence, a bio-electronic interface, connected to a multi-core super-computer equipped with terabytes of… everything. Once the bio-electronic interface was complete, the next step would be to connect up a permanent life support system to Poppy's frame. This would feed her intravenously, handle her bodily waste, supply her lungs with clean fresh air, monitor various life functions and administer drugs accordingly. The final stage would be to place her wired up body in a floatation tank, filled with a clear inert fluid. This all-important stainless-steel flotation tank was the clever bit. It could pitch and yaw to a limited degree, giving Poppy a sense of movement, velocity and position. It was also her home for life.

For almost two whole days there were absolutely no fag breaks, a bare minimum of tea breaks and even toilet visits were limited to every four hours. Yes, they were all being paid handsomely but for once that was purely academic. They were all driven on by excitement and anticipation. For Poppy to die now in their expert hands would be more than tragic, it would be catastrophic – and extremely upsetting too.

All of them had seemingly become very fond and protective of what was left of Poppy.

After 36 hours, Poppy's body began to resemble a human-shaped pin cushion with hundreds of wires attached to hundreds of needles. Her head became a complicated affair with sight, hearing, feeding, breathing, drinking and talking all having to be accommodated. Two ultra-high-definition OLED screens complete with lense arrays were fastened in an enclosure in front of her eyes, giving her virtually human quality 3D vision. Hearing was provided by ear implants and speech was *wired* directly from her vocal cords. Three tubes hovered in front of her mouth for food, drinks and mouth cleaning, all of which could be drawn in, using software commands. Finally, a couple of intravenous attachments were made for administering drugs.

They were on schedule and things were going well although no one tempted providence by saying it. Scientist Reynolds decided to put the kettle on. They would all have preferred a gin and tonic or whisky but they happily settled on coffee. Alcohol would come later!

Of course, it was all going far too smoothly, so in retaliation, Poppy's heart decided to start beating erratically. Normally a defibrillator

would have been the device to use, but two reasons made this impractical: One, there were several tiny needles inserted into her skin exactly where the pads should go and two, the high voltage of the defibrillator would damage the delicate electronics of the interface. Frantically, Spencer and Hogarth extracted the needles from around Poppy's chest area while Chris Reynolds and Justine Constable disconnected the many plugs from the interface machine. After a long couple of minutes, the two surgeons could finally begin defibrillation. The machine charged up and copious amounts of jelly were smeared on her burnt and blistered skin.

'Stand back! One, two, three!' shouted highly skilled surgeon A.

A crack of voltage sizzled across Poppy's chest, making her body involuntarily curl up as much as it possibly could.

'We have a steady beat!' shouted highly skilled surgeon B.

This unfortunate incident put them at least two hours behind schedule. Having to put dozens of fine needles back into her chest for the second time, was no longer done with precision and enthusiasm but now with haste and a sixth sense. They swore and cursed considerably as they repeated the process – the coffee went cold. They quickly traced the problem to one of the intravenous attachments. It had a valve which had somehow been turned off. Poppy's blood had been starved of some vital life-giving drug, resulting in her overstretched heart protesting. Fortunately, the right people were there at the right time to restart Poppy's heart and administer the correct drug to dispel the problem. They knew if they had another setback like that, they may not be so lucky.

Because they were well below ground with no windows to give them an indication of whether it was night or day, the scientists and surgeons lost all sense of time. A simple look at their watches or the wall clock would have dispelled the mystery but who the hell, had time to do that?

It was crucial that Poppy was not sealed into a machine without a window onto the world. Consequently, the Madeline Bull automaton had to be fully ready and working when Poppy became conscious. A delay in providing her with a world to experience would inflict sensory deprivation on her already suffering existence. For this reason, Rob Hogarth performed several tests on the software of the automaton while Justine constable worked her way through pages and pages of flow charts, testing the revolutionary radio system.

The Madeline Bull android, to receive Poppy's living essence, was the superior third model, MB3 (Madeline Bull 3). MB3 was, as near as

dammit, a perfect woman except for one minor detail, *she* was a machine. Their creation was so perfect that no one wanted to interfere with *her* but they had no choice, *she* had to be extensively violated. The most arduous task was to place hundreds of touch sensors, carefully and precisely, a millimetre or so under the skin. The onboard computer no longer had to deal with artificial intelligence so it was reprogrammed with software specifically to maintain and operate the machine's (Madeline's) vital functions. These functions included the very complex radio system and interpreting the signals relayed, to and fro, between Poppy's interface and Madeline the automaton. Fortunately, most of these modifications were complete long before Poppy arrived in the lab.

The radio system used by Madeline Bull to communicate with Poppy's interface was licensed at great cost, from Professor Braugenhau. This was the first and only application of the device – the only way it could function. Only one Braugenhau transmission could exist at any one time – in the whole world. Another downside to this new revolutionary radio system was that it was hugely complex. Custom made microcircuits had to be specially manufactured so that they would fit into Madeline Bull's compact frame.

Still, the mammoth task continued. Madeline Bull was no more than three meters away from Poppy, both with scientists and surgeons jostling around each of them. It was remarkable to watch. Such a concentration of expertise in one basement room and no one, apart from Turner, knew that this remarkable event was going on. Forty-eight hours came and went and still, no sleep was had by any. Mistakes were been made and unmade and this kept on preventing that little white light at the end of the tunnel from growing. However, they reached the point where they couldn't risk Poppy being anaesthetized for any longer than an hour. So, that's exactly how long they had.

Fifty-nine minutes and fifty-nine seconds later, the last screw was inserted into the lid of the life support tank. Unfortunately, it cross-threaded, but at least, once in, it should never have to come out. At the same moment, scientist Reynolds clicked the left button of his computer mouse and selected:

Tools…
Intravenous tube… A.
Anaesthetic… Stop.

11. Learning to walk

With no anaesthetic flowing through her veins, it was just a matter of waiting for Poppy to wake up naturally which hopefully, would not be for several hours. The team of six, now completely exhausted all headed home except for Chris Reynolds. He was the self-elected martyr, he didn't particularly volunteer to stay behind, everyone just expected him to. He had no choice but to try and catch some sleep on an operating table previously occupied by the *Madeline Bull 2* android. MB2, a vastly inferior automaton to MB3, had to make do with the cold, hard tiled floor.

This was ethically acceptable because MB2 was no longer complete. Both forearms and a complete right leg were missing from her torso as well as the upper half of her head. Therefore, she no longer had any particular right to be on the table.

Reynolds knew comfort would be compromised but this wouldn't present a problem. Obviously, androids don't require comfort or sleep but because Madeline Bull was controlled by Poppy, *she* had no say in the matter and had to stay inactive as well.

Reynolds loosened his trouser belt, undid the top buttons on his shirt and eased himself onto the operating table. He wouldn't exactly be snug and comfortable but inevitably, sleep would come all too easily.

With Madeline Bull already activated and on standby, *she* was ready for any incoming signal from Poppy's interface. With still no movement from the automaton over eight hours later, the obvious assumption was that Poppy was still asleep but this was not the case, Poppy had woken almost two hours ago. However, Poppy's new home, the floatation tank, by design, afforded complete insulation and isolation from the outside world. Because of this, she was incapable of disturbing the peace and stillness that the solidity of the tank presented. Consequently, she had no choice but to rest, scream every so often, and wait.

Reynolds easily managed to sleep for this amount of time, just over eight hours then suddenly his restful slumber ended with a start. An operating table is not normally the best place to wake up on. He imagined he had heard Madeline Bull move or talk or something but

clearly, she hadn't. The beautiful Madeline Bull machine was still lying motionless on the table and hadn't so much as blinked.

He looked at his watch, eight hours. He sensed something was wrong. It took several minutes before it dawned on him; Poppy's interface transmitter and receiver circuits were still on standby. Reynolds rushed to the mouse and clicked:

Communication…
Transmit on…
Receive on.

Instantaneously Madeline Bull opened her eyes, breathed in and uttered in the loudest voice an android could possibly muster, 'YOU BASTARD!!'

The shock of Poppy hearing herself shout, the fact that she *could* shout and the fact that she could see the pale blue ceiling of the lab, made her immediately forget about the traumatic two hours of sensory deprivation. Chris Reynolds sheepishly apologised. Poppy immediately discovered that she could move her head and then her view changed from a blue ceiling to a grey wall. A little bit more head movement and all manner of technical wizardry came into view.

'Please, try not to move too much. Allow yourself to get used to your new environment,' Reynolds cautioned.

It was implausible that the Poppy/Madeline android would simply stand up and behave instantly human. Like a newborn, she would have to learn to do most things all over again from scratch.

'At first,' Chris Reynolds told her, 'It will seem impossible, but in time it will all become second nature and you will find your new body to be as good or better than your old one. Think of it like suddenly having false teeth, bifocals, a hearing aid, stiletto heels, and walking on stilts but multiply that effect by a thousand. That'll give you a rough guide of how challenging it's going to be.'

Poppy / Madeline decided not to say anything for a while just in case it was another profanity.

It suddenly dawned on Reynolds, evidently, from what had just happened, Madeline Bull appeared to be fully working. Her lips moved, her voice seemed acceptably human-like even if it was a touch loud and abusive, her head moved to Poppy's command and her sight and hearing were functioning correctly. All this, however, said nothing as to how Poppy was feeling in herself. Added to her numerous ailments, within minutes she began to feel nauseous. Fortunately, initial motion sickness was anticipated. A particular drug

immediately began to flow through her bloodstream, preventing her from puking up inside the tank.

For days, Poppy continued to experience little more than her own reality: Being in a floatation tank, looking into LED screens, contraptions around her head, and gallons of saline fluid lapping around her terribly sore skin. However, as the days turned into weeks, she slowly became accustomed to these new alien feelings. Her body also became tolerant of her wounds, allowing the cocktail of drugs she was receiving to be substantially reduced.

Eventually, after many days, she became desensitized to such an extent that it became difficult to think that she was in 'that tank', that shiny steel box tucked away in the far corner of the room.

'Surely not. I can't possibly be in there, can I?' she finally asked herself.

All four scientists took it in turn, to help Madeline with the transition. None of them was a physiotherapist or a psychologist or a neurologist or anything else 'ist' but they did their job admirably. Madeline had to learn to walk all over again. This involved all manner of skills that many, many years ago had become second nature to her. Balance was a particular problem but if she fell, that was even more of a problem. Her real head in the tank only had a limited range of motion, moving only to a degree in sympathy with Madeline's artificial head. Madeline's head could find itself upside down, but Poppy's head couldn't. When she fell and this was quite often, disorientation was the norm. She had to learn from sight alone which way up her body was. She also had to become skilled in operating her new body smoothly and naturally as well as getting accustomed to new sensations of touching and feeling all over again.

The scientists had tremendous patience but they knew that time was at a premium. The normal procedure was that they would all go home in the evening, leaving Madeline alone in the lab until their return the next day. It was, after all, *her* home whether she liked it or not, but certainly not *their* home. After a few days, the loneliness waned and she almost yearned for peace and quiet so she could watch television or just chill out. She was always assured that if anything did go wrong, they would instantly know about it. This was providing they had remembered to log on to the secure *Madeline Bull* app.

It was many weeks before she was considered fully adroit and unified with her new body. Many frustrating, clumsy painful weeks before her human behaviour was totally convincing. Then, she walked over to Chris Reynolds, kissed him on the cheek and thanked him.

Finally, she was whole again, alive again, even more beautiful than she was before and perhaps vaguely happy – how could she not be? Unfortunately, for the moment, her new world consisted of no more than this clinical lab and the four scientists. She had tried her best to delve into their personal sides but they were all purposely tight-lipped, talking only about matters pertaining to the project. True, Chris Reynolds had become a kind of father figure to her and Justine Constable had indeed become a friend, but they certainly didn't replace Adam, her mother, or even her colleagues she used to work with. She hadn't, couldn't and wouldn't ever forget them.

It was now dawning on her that finally, beyond her wildest dreams, she had her life back as this new person, Madeline Bull. It was also dawning on her that any day now there was going to be a hell of a price to pay for this gift that had been bestowed upon her. Paying for it in money would be out of the question so it had to be in the form of some other favours, but what? The four scientists, as attached as they were to both the project and their new android/human friend, would, no doubt, move on to pastures new now that Madeline Bull was fully functioning. Clearly, there was a far greater sacrifice to endure than just losing your loved one, your mother and your friends. Gullible was one thing she was not; she knew that governments don't provide this kind of service for free. Whenever Madeline asked such questions, they always fell on deaf ears. Perhaps no one really knew the answers but there was no doubt that she would have to do something momentously significant in return for her new body.

Incidentally, Madeline now accepted Madeline as her proper name. If anyone shouted 'Poppy' she would certainly turn her head but now, Madeline, Madeline Bull was the name she mostly answered to.

Chris Reynolds often fell into the roles of tutor, teacher and therapist. He tried to explain the construction of her new body in layman's terms, but to non-technically minded Madeline, this was perceived as incessant jabbering. There were certain aspects of her new body that she thought she understood, particularly about her muscles. They operated by way of something called *soft* pneumatics. All her 96 muscles that covered her frame were akin to rubber bellows, some very small, some much bigger. Obviously, there was much more to it than that, but a simple explanation sufficed. To power everything she had the world's quietest and smallest diesel engine inside her. She found this very hard to believe owing to the fact that she used to own an old Ford Mondeo diesel which used to wake up the neighbours with the rattly noise and choke the wildlife with the smoke. Something she had to pay special attention to was refuelling her high-tech super new body. She half expected to find a filler cap somewhere

about her new body in which she had to place a garage forecourt diesel spout. Fortunately, this wasn't the case. She was marginally relieved to be told that all she had to do was drink a bottle of cooking oil once a day. Thank God, my taste buds are firmly confined inside the floatation tank, she thought.

12. Weaponry

After countless hours of boring coordination and dexterity exercises to perfect the symbiosis between her and the ultimate mechanical body, the day finally came when she was allowed to venture out. At last, she would discover exactly where her new home was. For the team, it was almost like old times when they sent the old Madeline Bull to Tesco. The scientists were naturally apprehensive as they sent Madeline off on her own, to do a spot of clothes shopping. Madeline took absolutely no encouragement. The frumpy, colour coordinated clothes that Justine Constable had provided her with were smart and practical but completely inappropriate for a seductive temptress. It was time Madeline made a statement.

This is the point in the story where the transition from the name Poppy to Madeline happens. Conveniently, this is also the point in the story where Madeline leaves Poppy's persona behind and develops a completely new one.

She always liked to dress stylishly, bordering on provocatively. Not obscenely erotic, but sufficient in all respects to get the men to notice her, without looking cheap and tarty. Realistically, Madeline could dress in a dirty sack and satisfy these requirements. She hadn't driven a car for a long time and that was using her own fleshy body. This would be a critical test to measure her level of adeptness and coordination. Not only that, it would test the whole system to the highest level.

All the scientists had their eyes fixed on the large wall-mounted TV relaying the view from Madeline's eyes. They all whooped with delight as they watched her drive off at breakneck speed, screeching tyres and doing racing gear changes. This is how Poppy always drove. Up until now, she never really had any respect for things mechanical. Madeline Bull, when just a mere machine, drove extremely cautiously due to the barrage of incoming data that had to be processed within. Now, with a human brain instead of a computer, Madeline could drive as fast as the law would allow, plus 10%. Speedo inaccuracy was always taken into account.

Mike Spencer tailed her, doing his best to keep up while continuously radioing back with shared excitement. They knew, at last, things were right, no confusion over the size of a loaf of bread this time. Barring some minor teething problems with the android power supply, the complex 3D sight system, the interface, the system software and the complex radio link, they really had cracked it this time.

In fact, nothing worth mentioning did go wrong, well, apart from the skimpy white lace blouse she bought was a touch too big. Perhaps an eights would have been better than a tens.

Two middle-aged men and a spinster, crowding around a 70-inch monitor, watching a beautiful, provocative young lady undress and try clothes on, could easily be misconstrued. The obvious irreverence of the situation never appeared to enter their heads although it was definitely not PG viewing material. Up until now, the Madeline automaton was a soulless machine with only computer-generated verve and vivacity. Now what was inanimate had truly become animate. What was clearly artificial and no more than a glorified robot, was now alive, was real and very, very alluring. No one uttered a word, even Justine remained strangely silent, all secretly hoping that the shopping spree would extend to swimwear and lingerie. Madeline was unconcerned that she had lost every morsel of her dignity. After all, her own ugly burnt bit of nakedness was well and truly hidden inside a stainless-steel tank.

Poppy had effectively brought a female-shaped lump of flesh-coloured silicone, well and truly alive – in a very sensual way.

Reality dawned again, as she returned to the car. Her home was a cold, clinical laboratory, underneath a nondescript office block – the place where she had been confined for nearly four long months. Did she have to go back? Did she have an option? Was there somewhere else she could go? Would she be punished if she didn't return?

Now that she was fully assimilated, she was in effect, reborn. Her skin was unburnt, all her physical pains had gone and she was beautiful, seriously beautiful. Catching up on life was very much overdue. But then she realised; that her darling, wonderful Adam was now beyond reach and out of bounds. She couldn't get back in touch with her old friends or even her mother. Poppy was officially dead. Her old home wasn't her home anymore. No longer could she enjoy a tasty Chinese or fish and chips and any form of sex life had serious incompatibility issues. Summing up, she solemnly concluded that she didn't have a bloody life!!

The lab was familiar, it was safe and it was where her real body was

and presumably would always be. For the moment, that's all she had, so *home* she went.

As she entered the lift, the lift with the secret, Mike surreptitiously followed in behind her.

'Where have *you* come from?' she asked cheerfully.

Mike didn't reply, he didn't know what to say.

'You've been following me, haven't you?' snapped Madeline.

Mike manipulated the lift buttons and the lift began descending beyond the limits of the display.

'Come on, I bet they've got champagne waiting,' said Mike.

'Champagne? What for?' Madeline asked, curiously.

'The first successful outing!'

'Oh, I see,' Madeline paused for thought, 'Not really for me then, eh?'

Actually, it was a cheap bottle of Prosecco from the corner shop. The budget wouldn't stretch as far as champagne. Madeline could go through the motions and tip it down her throat but there would be no effect on her sobriety whatsoever. Naturally, the refreshing sparkly taste could not pass through the airwaves to her real taste buds either. She had to be satisfied with orange juice sucked up a narrow tube inside the tank. The celebrations consisted of little more than a chat about Madeline's recent outing and a little speech delivered by Chris Reynolds:

'Well, we damn well did it! I hope they, whoever they are, will be satisfied with the end result as much as we are. I doubt if anyone else will, so I'd like to take this opportunity and thank myself and you all for a job well done. I don't have to remind any of you of the strict secrecy of this project. We are all aware of the consequences of loose tongues, so, clearly, no Nobel prizes for anyone. God knows it's been difficult not giving anything away to our friends and families. So again, all I can do is congratulate us, we have all been truly brilliant! I have to say I've found it a pleasure working with you all. You are truly talented people – the best there is. Finally, really only one thing left to say… I'm sure we all would like to thank Madeline, formerly Poppy. I don't think we could have wished for a better subject to work on. Her jovial and pleasant personality has made the job a pleasure. We are all truly going to miss you. So, if you would all like to raise your glasses… to Madeline, all the very best in your brand-new life!'

Everyone except Madeline joined in with the 'to Madeline' cheer. The 'we are all going to miss you' bit, resounded tangibly at the back of

her mind.

Once the pleasantries were over, it wasn't long before she found herself on her own again with only the television for company. This time, however, the heavy feeling of loneliness was almost too painful to bear. Presumably, she could now leave the lab, have a walk around the streets above, pop in a café and treat herself to a skinny latte and a muffin – no she couldn't. Perhaps she could ring her mother up and have a long chat like she used to – no she couldn't. Maybe she could go and call on Adam, have a kiss and a cuddle, a glass of rosé and then go to bed and make mad passionate love, no she couldn't, no she couldn't! NO, SHE COULDN'T!! She looked at the television guide to see what was on. Terminator 2 – that will do.

The next day arrived along with the usual alien feelings. It began with a short period of confusion immediately after she awakened. For these few seconds, it was obvious to her that her environment was unnatural. It was evident that her eyes were focusing on miniature television screens inches from her face. She could feel the sloppiness of the fluid lapping about her charred body and her sense of touch was different, but that's as far as it got. After a couple of minutes, she was oblivious to these unnatural feelings. She was completely Madeline Bull.

There was little to do to make a beautiful android, beautiful. No makeup was necessary. Her artificial skin around her eyes, cheeks and her lips had been appropriately pigmented in the right shades. Her hair, being made of bleach cleanable polypropylene, required no combing or straightening and any underwear as such, had been dispensed with because there was no purpose for them to perform. Her own teeth were automatically cleaned and breakfast was there instantly on tap, through a tube. In other words, the getting up in the morning process was over as soon as it began.

She patiently waited for nine o'clock to arrive as this was the time when at least one of the scientists usually arrived and Madeline would no longer be on her own. However, nine o'clock came and went. 9:30 came and went. Even ten o'clock was a non-event. For the very first time, she experienced the terrible emptiness and inhospitality of the Lab – her underground open prison.

Loneliness and boredom allowed an element of curiosity to surface. She had asked the scientists many questions but only a few had been answered satisfactorily. As she was on her own, she decided to use this time to do a little investigating. Nothing was found of any relevance in the drawers or cabinets. For once, everywhere was tidy and uncluttered. No photos, no notes or personal belongings were left

lying around. Nothing, absolutely nothing at all remained, even the waste paper bins had been emptied.

The computer, she thought, perhaps they had their own profiles on the PC. That would surely show up something or other. Madeline couldn't see anything wrong with prying a little.

With mouse in hand, Madeline was quickly scanning the menus along the top of the screen for clues. Unfortunately, the PC monitor didn't appear to have the familiar 'Windows' desktop format like she was used to. Instead, everything mentioned on the screen seemed wholly pertinent to her new body: schematics, circuit diagrams, operating instructions, refuelling, maintenance and…

'WEAPONRY?!'

She couldn't help but blurt out this unexpected word.

'That's right m' dear, weaponry.'

The reply came from an official-looking, bearded, bald man entering the lab.

'And who might you be?' Madeline asked nervously.

'Allow me to introduce myself, my name's Turner, Major William Turner.'

'Where are the others?'

'The others? Ah, you mean the scientists? Don't worry m' dear, you won't be requiring their services again. They've finished their task now and I must say what a first-class job they've made,'

Turner gave Madeline a disturbing, up down slithery look. Poppy sank as much as she could, albeit restrained and submerged in a floatation tank. Madeline hovered about her feet, the microprocessors within her, fighting to keep the delicate android machine balancing in an upright position. This was it; the time had come. There was no point in protesting, she was prepared for this moment, but it had come rather too suddenly. She had a suspicion that the team would eventually leave her but not this abruptly, without so much as a wave or a peck on the cheek.

'Where have they gone, what's happened to them: Chris, Justine, Rob and Mike?'

Madeline had no idea why she should think any ill had become of the team. However, she thought she had better ask the question in this

particular anxious tone… and not miss out any names.

‘They have all been debriefed and told to return to their normal lives, back with their friends and families. Now they have to forget about the project, forget about you and move on.’ Turner’s tone was excessively officious – more than Madeline cared for.

Was this a threat? Did he mean their lives were in danger if they ever contacted her again? Suddenly she decided to ask herself an overdue question albeit out loud, ‘what the bloody hell have I got myself into?’

‘You see m’ dear,’ Turner spoke patronisingly, ‘you don’t, strictly speaking, exist, so, the fewer people who know about you, the better.’

Many things were beginning to irritate Madeline right now but at the top of the list was the ‘m’ dear’ bit. If he said it just once more, she would… she would… well, she didn’t know yet, but she would definitely do something involving weaponry.

‘Please, explain exactly what is meant by weaponry and what’s it got to do with me?’ asked Madeline firmly.

Turner hesitated for a moment, he wanted what he was about to tell Madeline, to have the most possible impact.

‘I’m going to come straight to the point. The Madeline Bull project is and always has been for the sole purpose of discrete global problem solving which, more often than not will involve… termination.’ he strategically paused. ‘Originally, Madeline Bull was to be completely autonomous but the scientists had a few problems. *My* proposal was to give you your life back and make Madeline Bull work properly. Obviously, there’s no threat to your own life, you are completely safe in that tank over there. Accept the fact, m’ dear, you have a new and singular purpose, you are, amongst other things, a killing machine.’

For a moment, Madeline couldn’t think of anything to say. She was aware that he had said m’ dear again, but the words, termination and killing machine, reverberated around in her head, overriding any other irritations. It was certainly a career move she never particularly anticipated. The implications of what she had just heard were so enormous, so distasteful that it would take a while to sink in. A few seconds later she attempted to force it to sink in.

Killing people might not be all that bad, she thought unconvincingly. James Bond has a licence to kill, soldiers and armed police occasionally kill people as part of their job… She wasn’t remotely convinced.

‘You’re kidding, right? You can’t expect me to kill people just like that… You’re not kidding, are you?’ Madeline paused for a moment

while her brain raced. ‘No, no! I can’t, I won’t, I refuse. Look, I’m very grateful for what you’ve all done for me but I would never have agreed to that. No sorry, I refuse.’

‘I’m afraid, m’ dear, if you refuse, project Madeline Bull will be deemed unsustainable and will be closed down.’

‘So, what does that mean, you’ll turn me off?’

‘The body you are in is classed as a lethal weapon, category 2. We would have to eliminate any threat and dismantle you.’

Madeline was puzzled as to what kind of threat she presented or for that matter what her lethal weapons were but if she knew how to use them, she would definitely use one of them right now on this smug bastard before her. Suddenly she felt much better. She could kill under the right circumstances.

‘You could always disable my weapons, whatever they are, and let me live?’ she bleated.

There was an indeterminate period of silence lasting just enough time for Madeline to realise that Turner would not capitulate. His rules were unconditional and he was totally inflexible.

She continued, ‘okay, what exactly and where exactly are my weapons? What exactly is category 2 and exactly who would you like me to *kill*?’

‘Terminate, m’ dear, there’s a difference. Category 2 is one step down from a nuclear device.’

Turner became even more solemn and closed in tightly on Madeline. He glanced around just in case anyone had sneaked into the lab, lowered his voice and continued. ‘You have been created to eliminate or at least reduce in number, the members of Wardate’.

‘Firstly, stop calling me ‘m’ dear’ my name’s Madeline and secondly, what the hell is Wardate?’ she asked, getting progressively louder and more assertive.

‘Sssh! I happen to know a new recruit for Wardate was responsible for the way you are. Responsible for burning and killing well over two thousand people on that regretful day.’ he continued to whisper. ‘Residents of Wardate, as they like to call themselves, are unashamedly, thoroughly, evil individuals. Their sole purpose is to cause horrendous suffering to innocent everyday people. That is their *raison d’etre.* Your *raison d’etre* is to eliminate them.’

‘Well, why the hell didn’t you say so?’ said Madeline sprightly.

There was no reason for Madeline to be happy about her new role, after all, she had obviously never killed before. The worst weapon she had ever used was an elastic band when she catapulted it at Adam. It went in his eye and blinded him for a couple of minutes. She felt bad enough about that so how on earth was she going to end someone's life?

And then she had a moment's reflection and thought about the evil bastard who had caused her horrific injuries…

'Yes, I could do it,' she confirmed to herself.

'We are living in troubled times. There are daily incidents and horrendous events taking place all over the globe. Most of them are probably accredited to just a small group of evil individuals. So, my… Madeline, no time for lengthy training, in fact, there is no time for any training at all. I'm afraid your time starts now,' said an unsympathetic Turner.

'But I don't even know…'

'You can use a computer, can't you? There's a mole on your lower left arm.'

Madeline was wearing the white tight lace short sleeve top that she purchased the day before so the mole was exposed and poised ready for fondling.

She instinctively touched the beauty spot. For anyone else, it would have been an unwanted brown lump but somehow, on Madeline's arm, it didn't look out of place, it *was* a beauty spot. Suddenly, in Madeline's field of vision, bottom left, appeared the familiar Microsoft Windows format. She instinctively pressed on the mole and another familiar box opened up. She waggled her mole a little until the cursor was on '*Programs*', then she waggled a bit more.

'It *is* a mouse!' exclaimed Madeline.

Turner watched intently as she played with her mole. Unfortunately, it wasn't a convenient time otherwise it would have become one of his more memorable moments.

'You can find all that you want there. Weaponry, Sat navigation, Android maintenance, internet, e-mails. If you get stuck, I suggest you use the help files,' Turner continued in his aloof manner.

'Okay, okay, assuming I go along with all this, what do I do now?' Madeline appeared to be rapidly accepting her terms and conditions and was keen to get on with whatever she had got to get on with doing.

‘Your global sat-nav has your new home programmed into it. Drive there in that nice little Mini Cooper we’ve provided you with. Always make it a habit to check that you’re not being tailed. You never know who might be taking an interest in you. Oh, and keep watching your e-mails, you won’t have long to wait for your first mission.’

Turner had said exactly what he had intended to say to Madeline, concisely and to the point. He stood up and expected Madeline to follow him.

She hesitated for a second or two but she knew it was futile to voice any kind of protest. Payback time had arrived, and rather suddenly. She had a last glance at her… Poppy’s tank. It was strange, it would never be anything else but strange. She was inside that thing and *she* was about to be all alone in this cold, empty, clinical room.

‘Will I ever come back here?’ asked Madeline quietly and anxiously.

‘No, there’s no need to. Feel free to take a good look around before it’s sealed off,’ said Turner, heartlessly.

‘What about my real body, what happens if something goes wrong?’

Madeline intuitively knew there wasn’t going to be an answer to this question and if there was, she probably wouldn’t like it, but she asked it anyway. Turner predictably ignored her.

13. Retribution

Madeline enjoyed the drive. It was a delight driving down pretty country lanes, being held up behind tractors and avoiding suicidal rabbits. It was the first time she'd used a sat-nav and quickly realised that she had a lot in common with it. It was a voice trapped in a machine just like she was. They had a chat. The voice was a friend taking her to her new home. Ironically, it happened to be familiar territory. As it happened, Adam's territory – Bristol. For that reason, she didn't need the full depths of navigation that the sat-nav was offering. She knew a much quicker way using motorways and dual carriageways but who was she to argue with her new friend?

'This could be interesting,' she said out loud.

Her new home was no more than four miles from Adam's neck of the woods. For no logical reason, she hoped he hadn't done anything stupid and moved. Was this a coincidence or just someone playing cruel games with her?

The house was a new build on a new estate in a new suburb. As homes go, it didn't inspire any comment. At least it's a start, she thought and that's probably how it was roughly described in the estate agent's literature. The house was filled to bursting point with a small television, a small sofa, a bed and a bedside cabinet. To complete the package, it had a functional bathroom and a minimalist *fitted* kitchen.

what more could she possibly want?

How she longed for a time machine to phase-warp-shift her back to that evening with Adam, walking along the Thames embankment, nine or so months ago. If only she could have fallen ill with food poisoning or something at the end of that wonderful evening. Then she wouldn't have been able to go to that troublesome country where she was horribly burnt alive.

This moment had been a long time in coming but finally, it arrived. Emotions had been building up inside her for months. Her fortitude had been admirable and unyielding. Undoubtedly, she was one tough cookie to crack. What she had gone through, the pain, the suffering, the heartbreaking and… the loneliness, was unimaginably awful. Now, though, it was time for a reality check and come to terms with

how bad things really were. She may have had scientists and surgeons around her for many hours at a time but essentially, she had gone through it all completely alone. She was alone now and probably would always be alone. She cried, sobbed and buried her head deep in her hands.

Madeline had real tears. Curiously she went to the bathroom to have a look in the mirror. She really was crying but that wasn't the most remarkable thing she saw. This was the first time she had really, properly seen her new self, close up. She was truly gobsmacked. Her reflection was stunning, beyond gorgeous, beyond anything she could have possibly imagined. As Poppy, she always considered herself attractive, not exactly a Hollywood beauty, but now, she was in a whole new league. Consequently, her tears stopped in an instant. No wonder the scientists were so nice to me, she thought, they were probably coming on to me. I was just a sexual plaything.

This thought should have made her even more depressed but it didn't. Deep down she yearned to be admired, to be noticed, and above all to be conspicuous. Her new looks would certainly be an asset – possibly the most effective of all her weapons. How right she was. She decided there and then that from now on, she would adopt a new persona to match this new person that she had become. None of the old traits of scatterbrained Poppy Cock. Madeline Bull, secret agent and assassin must act accordingly. An assassin must surely carry a great responsibility. She took stock of her unusual situation. She felt every bit normal and had adapted to her new form remarkably well. In fact, she had adapted so well that she sensed that Madeline Bull really was her, really was her body, really was her bits and pieces, really was her entirely. Some things were different though, she was no longer human and no longer free.

There was absolutely no point in putting the kettle on or pouring herself a gin and tonic unless she just pointlessly went through the motions. She thought she'd try a cup of tea for comfort reasons but the cupboards were just filled with cooking oil. She rested on the bed feeling only marginally more comfortable than doing a one-armed handstand. She decided to watch television but the picture was awful. Apparently, an aerial was an optional extra in a starter home. Then for no apparent reason, everything went blank and her android body abruptly shut down. Okay, I get the message, she said out loud, I'll watch television on my internal system instead. After a long few minutes, her body revived but she was too engrossed in an episode of *Game of Thrones* to notice. Much later she emerged from her inner self, got bored very quickly, had another pointless stroll around her new home and then checked her e-mails. Inexplicably, wiggling her little

mole on her arm, sort of tickled, it made her laugh. Much better! Something else Madeline could do – chuckle.

Only one e-mail:

Ticket at Heathrow, flight tomorrow 15:45, destination: Ndanga. Use stealth program 4. Target: Tara Gogli, use weapon 2 – T. Additional, seek Residents of Wardate list.

Stealth program 4 was very handy. As Madeline had a considerable number of metal parts inside her including a little diesel engine and a high-powered radio transmitter, airport security would almost certainly pounce on her. Once engaged, 'stealth program 4' effectively fooled the metal detector and any other detectors that the airport happened to have.

There were other stealth programs installed within her frame which fooled x-ray machines, infrared sensors and carbon dioxide detectors. The stealth program 4 also included a human vital signs generator.

The Madeline Bull android machine was a very clever piece of kit but when it came to weaponry it was just plain overkill. Weapon 2 was in her left-hand index finger. It contained a retractable hypodermic needle filled with various selectable contents. Content 'T' was a fast-acting deadly poison. Other weapons for her convenience included a high voltage taser gun, poisonous gas, disabling gas and of all things, a high-powered microwave thingy. Exactly what she would use that for completely escaped her. Certainly not provided for warming up a ready meal, she thought.

People were noticeably nice to her on the aeroplane and also very nice to her at the African passport control. 'I must be coming across as a very *nice* sort of person… or it's because I'm gorgeous,' she thought. She could perfectly justify this degree of arrogance and vanity because this time, she wasn't designed by God.

It was a familiar airport in a familiar country but she wasn't there, she was in England, but also there. It was all so weird. Once outside the terminal, she could feel the sun burning down on her shoulders, the dry parched air hitting the back of her throat and the flies buzzing irritatingly around her face. The technology in her new body was truly remarkable. For a moment, she thought it must be like a waking dream she'd heard people talk about but this was no dream that she could force her way out of.

She was on her own, really on her own. No courier to meet and greet her, no hotel room pre-booked and no one she could call and have a chat with. All she had to do was find this so-called Tara Gogli, prod him with her index finger and then be on a flight home as soon as

automaton-ly possible.

Many things were mulling around in her head. Why should Turner send her here of all places, back to the same country where the terrible deed happened? If this Gogli person was the one responsible for that awful day and her even more awful injuries, why the hell had *she* got to deal out the punishment? She didn't particularly want the job of revenge killing even if she was the victim of his atrocity. She wanted justice and a proper trial. She wanted the mass murderer to be disgraced, humiliated and punished appropriately. She wanted people all over the world to know what this monster had done so that they could thoroughly despise him. She wanted him to serve in some third-world barbaric prison cell for most of his life. And only then after years of misery and suffering would she like him to die, preferably by two thousand, one hundred and fifty-seven cuts – the precise number of people he killed that day. What was she going to provide, a nice quick painless death? Thousands of innocent people all over the world get far, far worse than that, daily. Perhaps she could choose a painful poison or a slow-acting poison. She looked in her menu hoping that 'long lingering' or 'agonising' might be there but they weren't. In fact, there was only one poison available and that was boring old 'T' which for some reason stood for arsenic. Using her mole, she clicked on 'weapon 2' (hypodermic), then on 'T' (arsenic) and then on 'prepare'.

The airport complex seemed to have a severe lack of facilities, namely porters, trolleys and taxis. By a complete miracle, she managed to find a bus going to Ndanga, but the luck went no further than that. For fifteen miles she had to suffer a level of discomfort that broke all boundaries and managed to penetrate through to her real body in the tank. Eventually, after what seemed like hours, a faded, bullet-ridden sign appeared at the roadside displaying the word 'dang'. The traumatic journey was at an end.

Even though of android construction, it was still necessary for her slender form to recover from the journey. She sat on her small, slightly less uncomfortable holdall, at the side of the dusty road. It didn't provide much of a seat as it was almost empty. The normal women's things: iPads, hair dryers, shampoos and conditioners, makeup, lotions, beauty products, unmentionables, baby wipes, underwear etc were, as previously mentioned, not needed. A simple change of clothes: a short white, sleeveless, backless, mini dress (a necessity for any temptress), a skirt, a T-shirt and a bottle of cooking oil were all that was necessary.

Her task now was to find Gogli. As her inbuilt sat-nav refused to

cooperate, she wiggled her mole and was quickly connected to the internet. She giggled out loud, this time for another reason; she was going to Google Gogli. It came up with *'Did you mean Gorgi?* As she suspected, there was nothing listed. His home address, street view and directions would have been far too much to wish for. She slightly altered the spelling to Goglee. All that came up were details about a furniture shop in Harrogate. The internet address finder she had privileged access to, only accepted postcodes, zip codes and addresses. Nothing else for it, she had to ask passers-by if they knew where Tara Gogli lived. Even though she asked in English, it was blatantly clear that everyone understood her. It seemed that the mere mention of this name wakened an inner rage. Some hissed at her, some spat at her, some slapped her across the face and some simply ran away screaming. There were a few who were overly helpful but clearly, they had an ulterior motive; they just wanted to rip her clothes off and have their wicked way with her. After bravely asking what seemed like half the population of the town, a large car appeared out of the dust and pulled up next to her. A backseat occupant beckoned her in.

Madeline had no fear whatsoever, fear, after all, was a human failing and she wasn't human. She was just pleased with a result at last. Eagerly she got into the back seat of the dark blue saloon. Not so eagerly she shared the back seat with someone who clearly had serious issues with soap, toothpaste and washing powder. No one said anything for quite a while. This person sitting next to her was repulsive on a whole new level. chewing something that resembled a used contraceptive. It wasn't long before he decided it was time for one of his grubby hands to stroke Madeline's leg. Madeline had no choice but to lift the offending part of him, off her. She made a mental note to wash her beautifully crafted hand and leg as soon as possible.

'You ask for Gogli? What-a-you want him for?'

Exciting, thought Madeline, proper gangster stuff. She wondered if this revolting creature was Gogli's friend or foe.

She decided to go with the friend option.

'I need him to do a job for… us. He will be well paid,' Madeline lied.

'What kind of job?'

'I'd rather tell *him* that, face to face.'

'I ask you again missus, what job?'

'Look, I can't tell you, I have to speak to him. For all I know, you might be the police.'

'Police? Yes, we are police, missus, we demand you tell us!'

Strangely enough, at that very moment, they pulled up outside a rundown single-storey building which didn't look remotely like a police station. Well, that didn't go all that well, but I will get better, she thought. The last time she put on such a performance like that involved a speeding ticket, a very short skirt and 'I'm so sorry officer, I thought it was fifty along here'. However, that was in another life and this was altogether more serious.

Madeline fully expected to be manhandled but for some unfathomable reason, she wasn't. With some kind of misplaced respect, they gently ushered her out of the car, through the front door of the small building and into a little back room. This room lacked many things: windows, carpets and furniture but it did have a single light bulb dangling from a severely cracked ceiling. The bulb gave off just enough light to reveal the blood and excrement-stained walls and floor. People had not left this room with fond memories.

'Well, they won't get blood or poo out of me,' she said with confidence.

Madeline was certain that she had enough devices built into her frame to easily escape from this putrid dungeon but she knew that that would achieve nothing. If anyone knew where Gogli lived, chances are, it would be these goons.

She was aware that any undue persuasion would achieve very little other than discover that she was an android – especially when they tried to extract teeth and fingernails. She had to play this tactfully.

For two hours she had to endure the displeasure of the room. However, two hours of solitude, stench and discomfort were no great inconvenience for Madeline. She had previously discovered that, amongst other things, she had a media player built into her system. So, with the internet at hand, she used the time to catch up on several television soaps and then listen to Michael Bublè for a while.

Finally, she was ushered into a far more respectable room with barely any blood on the floor at all. The walls were painted in a drab shade of grey and there was absolutely no sign of poo… anywhere.

Another man had now arrived at the house, making it three smelly, lecherous goons to deal with. The one she hadn't seen before began the interrogation.

'My friends tell me you want to see Gogli?'

Madeline was beginning to lose her patience. She hadn't got time for all this. The plan was: fly here, find Gogli, kill him, fly home and have a bath – precisely in that order.

She forced a ‘yes’ from her perfect lips but she wasn’t really in the mood for answering questions. She was more interested in seizing the moment when all three were close together and then test out one of her other weapons: weapon 4, the disabling gas.

Madeline gently caressed the little mole on her arm. Naturally, this was somewhat arousing to her all-male company. Clearly, they didn’t have the pleasure of female company all that often. It was fortunate that Madeline had chosen to wear a short skirt as it allowed the gas to escape freely. Although the men obviously indulged in several disgusting habits, they had never experienced such a bad case of flatulence in their lives.

‘Pardon me, in-flight meals always have this effect on me,’ lied Madeline.

The odour wasn’t all that objectionable, rather a sweet fragrance. It wasn’t silent or deadly either but all three men were rapidly out for the count. She hoped that they would be out for some time.

There had to be some sort of connection between these obnoxious characters and Gogli. She checked the other rooms to make sure no one was hiding. The house comprised two rooms plus a kitchen and a bathroom. The term bathroom used loosely in this case. It was somewhere to go if you were desperate and couldn’t hold it in for a minute longer. Better to risk constipation or urinal infection than succumb to using the facilities. Then there was the small kitchen equipped with a highly crazed porcelain sink, sandwiched between two filthy cream worktops. The last room, the main reception room, had just about everything in it: two beds, a desk, television, sofa, two chairs, cabinets and cupboards. Considering it was only about three metres square, this was a remarkable achievement. Madeline was drawn to searching the desk drawer. It was full of files, documents and X-ray photographs of all things. She was about to start looking somewhere else when, in her peripheral vision, she spotted the name ‘Turner’ on one of the documents. That’s a coincidence, she thought. Further down on the document was a flight number and the name Madeline Bull. Now that’s another coincidence, she thought.

Her travel bag was amongst the debris on the floor; she took out a bottle of cooking oil and slowly sipped the contents until the bottle was empty.

Now, she knew what to do.

There was a full roll of parcel tape on the desk. She was sure that she had heard somewhere that if you tie someone’s feet and hands altogether behind their backs, they are completely incapacitated. A

few minutes later, three sets of grubby hands and stinking feet were bound tightly together with the sticky brown unforgiving tape.

Eventually, the three men began to stir from their slumber. At first, they groaned a little and then, moments later when they realised their predicament, they frantically writhed and contorted to try and free themselves. They couldn't and after a few minutes settled down into a humiliating motionless state. The furious language took a little longer to settle, but when it had, Madeline decided to do a little interrogation of her own.

'What are you doing with this letter!? It's got my flight number on it, and it's signed by a man named Turner!' she raged, waving the document in front of them.

The local language was not one she was familiar with but the worst of swear words uttered all seemed to be English.

'Look, I'm not usually violent. How about just telling me all you know about Gogli and I'll cut you free.'

Still, no recognisable English was coming from their mouths, just a stream of profanity.

'Okay, okay, have it your way. I suppose I could inject one of you with something to make you talk, but where's the sport in that? Tell you what, I'll go and put the kettle on. Boiling water on thumbs and toes will be much more fun.'

This menacing behaviour was all new to her, not to say that she wasn't enjoying the moment. Threats from a drop-dead gorgeous temptress may perhaps have come across as a little lame, so just to confirm that she was deadly serious, she went into the kitchen. It took a few minutes before Madeline returned with a kettle full of boiling water and in that time, all credit to them, two of them had managed to wriggle together, pitifully trying to undo one another's tape.

'Boys! Boys! I expected no less from you. Now, who would like to be first? Come on, don't be shy. Hurry up and decide before the kettle goes off the boil.'

Madeline was slightly disturbed that she was shamefully enjoying this new sadistic side of her.

'Okay! Missus Bull, we tell you when you unfasten us.'

'No, tell me first, *then* I'll let you have the scissors,' said Madeline, perilously holding the kettle above them.

'Okay, okay, you will find Gogli at the Castle, Castle Colistin.'

‘And where is that, exactly?’

‘About five kilometres, heading west from here!’

‘Just one last question.’

Madeline tilted the kettle sadistically. A few drops of boiling water landed in the general area of taped-up thumbs and toes.

‘Who is this Gogli?’

Each one had something to say:

‘He’s the devil, he has his agents everywhere.’

‘He knows you are coming.’

‘Turner promised you wouldn’t hurt us.’

Suddenly everything was blatantly clear. The whole experience had been a charade. In essence, they were her tour guides. For any onlookers, they had to appear to be thoroughly bad. Bad guys, it seemed, were the only ones safe from Tara Gogli’s reign of terror.

‘This is all a sham, isn’t it?’

She wiped her finger on a patch of blood on the floor.

‘Pigs blood? You’re genuinely terrified of this Gogli, aren’t you?’

Madeline’s question was rhetorical which was just as well as they were all done with talking. She assumed Turner, in his infinite wisdom, had arranged for these men to meet her in Ndanga. Their task was to indirectly provide her with the relevant information and some form of transport.

She realised that being good or bad is always relative. Certain people in parts of this country were oozing with so much evil that perhaps in comparison, these three characters were saints.

‘I don’t know why you lot haven’t done something to sort this madman out yourselves. Would have saved me an awful lot of suffering. Surely, he’s not that untouchable?’ suggested Madeline.

But then it dawned on her, that was exactly the reason why she had been sent here. She was completely impervious to his evil because she was fundamentally a machine. He couldn’t intimidate her, he couldn’t threaten her and he couldn’t hurt her – anymore.

She stalled and shut down for a moment to let what she’d just thought, sink in. She wasn’t just an assassin. Anyone can, with practice, be an assassin. She was a level above that. She was a devil slayer who had been sent to kill… the devil. If ever there was a devil,

Tara Gogli seemed to fit the bill perfectly.

Mere mortals wouldn't be able to kill the devil. He would have too many tricks up his sleeve and too many temptations on offer, but an android? That surely would be different. An android controlled by someone who had shaken off death, who had suffered beyond most people's comprehension of the word, who had encountered the wrath of this particular person's devilry and survived, her credentials were just perfect.

She was a devil slayer.

In fact, everything had been shrewdly planned from the moment she arrived in the country. The evidence was there in the letter she found from Turner. The men knew it was inevitable that they would be tied up. That's why there just happened to be a fresh roll of parcel tape conveniently at hand. They probably knew about the fart gas and were prepared for it. They had allowed the information regarding the directions to Gogli's home to be extracted under reasonable duress.

'Take the blue car around the back; the keys are in the drawer on the left,' said one of the men on the floor.

'Has it got air con? No, it hasn't, has it? I'll take yours instead!'

Of course, air conditioning provided no benefit whatsoever to an android body but Madeline still kept to her old human traits. She unhooked the car keys from a rusty nail on the wall and also for devilment, took the other car keys out of the drawer as well.

'Lady, one thing you must know about Gogli…'

'Don't worry, I can handle myself. I have a few tricks up my sleeves.'

'No, listen lady, Gogli is… not a man.'

Madeline didn't say anything – just raised an eyebrow in curiousness (a particular facial movement considered vital for any android). She tossed a pair of scissors at them. Unfortunately, the pointy end lodged in one of the men's thighs… It was a good time to leave. She vowed never to step foot in a place like that again. The three men remained fastened up for quite a while. It wasn't easy using a pair of scissors with thumbs and fingers tightly taped together.

In all their days, they'd never encountered a woman quite like Madeline Bull. Despite their incapacitation and humiliation, it hadn't been a particularly bad experience and on reflection, quite a privilege meeting her.

Madeline confidently set off in the borrowed car. Now being the driver and not a confined passenger, she could enjoy the journey – as

best as she could. It wasn't long before she came across a signpost for Colistin pointing in exactly the opposite direction. She never did get the hang of west and east. A cloud of grey dust billowed up as she aggressively U-turned the large heavy saloon on the gravel road. Within a few minutes, she was passing what she thought was the little flat-roofed house that she vowed never to step foot in again. Then she passed several more identical flat-roofed houses. Not knowing exactly which house it was, was convenient. Now she had a perfectly good excuse why she wouldn't be returning the car.

The remainder of this small town was altogether sinister and disturbing with no visible signs of life. No men, women, children or even dogs were basking out in the sunshine. Clearly, something or someone was blighting this area with a substantial amount of dread.

Madeline now had time to focus her thoughts on the fact that Tara Gogli was not a man. If he wasn't a man, what the hell could he be? A vampire? A ghost? A wizard? A woman?! And then it dawned on her. There was only one thing he could be, a boy, obviously! She wondered if a mere boy could really be a devil. It was easy to see how someone childlike could be revered in this tribal, superstitious, God-fearing community. Even here, it was the 21st century, but legends and curses would always shape people's lives in a country that was deprived of having a regular dose of *The Simpsons*.

During her few inactive moments, possibly through boredom, she had taken to reading through the specification of her android body in her menu section. In one way it was like the mobile phone she used to own. She often thought about her little electronic friend and what had happened to it. Almost certainly it had melted into one lump of plastic in the flames, but Madeline liked to fantasise that it had somehow survived and its little sim card was still alive and well. Like her mobile phone, her new android body also had a similar menu where all its features and facilities could be accessed. However, the comparison ended right there. The technology of her new body was way beyond anything contained in even the smartest of mobile phones.

She accessed the internet with her mole while she was driving. This was perhaps a worse demeanour than driving while using a mobile phone, applying lipstick, and eating a cheeseburger, all at the same time. However, she regarded herself as a sort of British agent and therefore licensed to get away with almost anything. She typed 'Castle Colistin' into the Google search engine and to her amazement, there it was: Pictures, aerial view, detailed history and a map showing how to get there. She found it somewhat bizarre that there was a real castle

here in this part of the world. It wasn't remotely like Caernarfon castle or Windsor Castle but it was on a small hill, it had a wall around it and it had turret appendages on each corner of its rudimentary square design. From the photo it didn't appear to be made from stone or brick but some kind of grey shiny metallic material.

The journey seemed endless, it may only have been five kilometres but on these roads, a journey was always an expedition and all sense of distance disappeared after the first hundred metres. If you were foolish enough, you could attempt to cruise along at 80 mph. However, with the washboard road surface, the car would quickly dismantle itself, not to mention causing a dust cloud which would blot out the sun for most of the day. Realistically, 25 mph was ideal and the benefit of keeping to that speed was that you could enjoy the scenery and also avoid the elephants. The scenery was noticeably pleasant for such an arid part of the world. Millions upon millions of pretty red-y brown flowers blanketed the fields on either side of the road. She was hopeless when it came to plants, flowers and horticulture so pretty red flowers had to suffice.

Whether it was the picturesque landscape or not, Madeline decided that for some inexplicable reason, she was enjoying herself. She realised that despite Turner denying her vital spy training, she could actually do this secret agent stuff – no problem. 'Up to now, it had been a piece of cake,' she thought… 'Oh, for a piece of cake!'

She had a suck on her food tube – cold tomato soup, 'hmm, not bad!'

Any issues she had with being on a mission to kill someone were pushed to the back of her mind where they would stay until the moment of reckoning.

For some inexplicable reason, it took almost one hour to arrive at the castle and then even more frustration set in.

'Would you believe it, a bloody awful, bone-shaking drive, not passed a single car and then when I get here, it takes me ages to find a parking space,' she groaned. 'How can such an ugly, characterless building in the middle of nowhere attract so many tourists?'

On reflection, it was doubtful if they were tourists. More like devil worshipers on a kind of pilgrimage. However, they still seemed to be behaving as tourists do. Many were drinking in the bars and sipping espressos under parasols surrounding the perimeter walls of the castle. Some were wandering around with cameras and mobile phones hoping to get a photo or video of the devil himself. The town and its streets weren't exactly touristy, but despite the impoverished dwellings and deprivation, visitors' needs were well and truly catered

for.

The Castle completely intimidated the town beneath it. The building itself was completely unlike any other castle type building and followed its own architectural guidelines. Close up, it was clear that the shiny material of the castle walls was in fact polished stainless steel. Other unexplainable artefacts were built into its construction: Car wheels, huge gas bottles and a collection of filing cabinets for its corners. A stadium light, more at home around a football pitch, hovered menacingly overhead. Perhaps the owner had a thing about illumination. Perhaps he was afraid of the dark!

Naturally, there were guards at the entrance to the Castle, not the sort you would see around Buckingham Palace, but guards all the same. They were wearing trendy sunglasses, gun holsters and crisp white suits. The suits didn't fool anyone, white was to keep them cool, certainly not to make them appear angel-like. They were evidently the devil's advocates. In keeping with their manner, they occasionally shot at passing tourists. Naturally, local bylaws encouraged them to miss if at all possible but all the same, they enjoyed it. Scaring the shit out of people *was* in their job description and that's all that mattered!

Madeline made her way to the Castle entrance. She didn't look like a devil worshiper or tourist so the guards refrained from shooting her. Besides, behind their sunglasses, it was a sure bet that their evil eyes were mentally undressing her.

'Cooee! Don't suppose you'd like to show me around?' asked Madeline, cheekily.

The guards didn't reply. They would have liked to but it was more than their job's worth to fraternise with the common public. Perhaps they longed to get out of the heat, wriggle out of the pact they had made with the devil and have a normal job but they only had themselves to blame. They shouldn't have replied to the job advert: *Wanted, guards for Colostin Castle, must be evil and nasty*. On reflection though, they quite enjoyed being able to shoot, spit and swear at people. They most likely would miss throwing stones at the cars and being thoroughly, thoroughly horrible from the minute they were on duty to the moment they clocked off.

'Lost your tongues? I'd love to look around the castle. Perhaps one of you handsome boys could show me around?'.

Madeline didn't want to push her luck too much. As far as she knew, she wasn't bulletproof and besides she hated bad language especially when it didn't come from her own lips.

'My name's Madeline. Shame neither of you is going to talk to me, we

could have had a lovely time. Oh well, better go. I'm really hot, can't wait to get out of these clothes,' said Madeline provocatively

She surprised herself with how easily she fell into the demeanour of a brazen tart. Poppy never used to be like this but now she had new shoes to fill and the ego of Madeline Bull to hide behind. As everyone knows, part and parcel of being an assassin and a secret agent is behaving outrageously. She seductively lifted the hem of her short pleated skirt and wafted a pretend insect off her thigh. Then, to add to the effect, she manipulated the mole on her arm:

Tools, appearance, breasts, inflate.

As she turned away and began to walk back down the slope towards the town, she heard a faint but clear voice behind her.

'Eh, you, English lady, meet me here tonight, six-thirty. My name's Linton.'

Then she heard another louder voice behind her.

'I'll be here at six. The name's Graft.'

'Boys, boys, relax. Surely, I can meet you both here tonight at the same time, can't I? I just love threesomes. Two strong men, two of everything, much more fun, don't you think? See you both at six, OK?'

'Men, so predictable,' she thought. Something else she now predicted – a bout of flatulence brewing for later on.

Well before six o'clock had arrived, all the assorted dwellings around the castle had closed their doors and shuttered their windows. The whole town had become chillingly lifeless. The castle floodlights, now brighter than the setting sun bathed the town in an eerie cold white light. The stainless-steel castle structure scattered this dazzling light randomly and indiscriminately.

All the tourists had gone, leaving the whole town empty and inhospitable. Only automatons and superheroes stayed around at night in this place. No one else was brave enough. Certainly, no Police, nobody taking a stroll, no friendly fast-food drive-ins, no cosy little pubs, no people having barbeques in their gardens, just an eerie quietness. A gust of wind blew a bail of tumbleweed down the street. It was intentionally this way. No one was encouraged to stop after nightfall.

There were one or two locals with a conscience who poked their heads bravely through their doors. Worried for her safety, they did their best to encourage Madeline to leave. She appreciated their concern but simply had to be rude in the nicest possible way – she was stopping!

She hadn't quite worked out how she was going to complete her mission but she was not going to leave until she had somehow claimed an eye for an eye etc., etc. Tara Gogli's life was going to be extinguished in the most befitting way possible – it could take a while.

As she walked up to the castle entrance, there was a last futile attempt to warn her away and then the brave old soul slammed her window shutters tightly closed. The guards were there, Linton and Graft, they were swearing profusely at each other. When they caught sight of her, they immediately stopped their bickering, smiled in a truly evil way, walked over to her and grabbed an arm each.

'Boys, boys don't be so eager, first, you show me around and then afterwards, if you like, I'll show you around,' she said saucily, casting a glance down at herself.

The guards had a brief unintelligible chunter, agreed on something with each other and then escorted her in through the main gates. Suddenly, out of nowhere, two Alsatian dogs flew towards them like angry ballistic missiles, but contravening one of Newton's laws of physics, stopped instantly, two metres away from them.

'Meet Rocky and Ricky,' said Linton as he offered doggy chocs to both dogs.

'What nice names and such nice dogs,' Madeline lied unconvincingly.

The dogs, happy with their meaty centred chocolates, ran off to find someone else to terrify and then eat. It turned out to be the fastest tour Madeline had ever experienced. If the situation wasn't so serious and terrifying, Madeline would have found it quite amusing. Clearly, they had something else on their perverted tiny minds, certainly not being tour guides.

It wasn't long into the tour before one of them briefly pointed towards the evil owners living quarters. It was a small section of the castle on the west side, decked with the shiniest of all the stainless steel. Evidently, Gogli chose to have views of the mountains and pretty fields in the distance rather than the small impoverished town below.

'Hey, is that the owner, then?' asked Madeline, pointing to a shadowy figure moving across one of the windows.

'Avert your eyes from our master!' bawled Graft, noticeably trembling.

'Sorry!' said Madeline expressively. Naturally, she was not sorry in the slightest but she acknowledged that she had committed some sort of cardinal sin.

She didn't completely avert her eyes and managed to observe the dark

figure lingering momentarily in another window. The castle light revealed a lanky teenage boy with a misleading innocence.

'That's Gogli, isn't it?' asked Madeline excitedly, bracing herself for another scolding.

'Hush! Do not speak of him,' Graft bawled and trembled at the same time.

Madeline had seen enough. It was time to get on with her job. She subtly brought the tour to a close.

'Is there a nice comfortable little room where we could all go and cool down? I'm so hot, just *have* to get these shoes off.'

Linton and Graft hastily escorted Madeline, in the gentlest way they could manage, into a small storeroom. On the plus side, it was cosy, dry and dimly lit. Linton hastily closed the door. Graft couldn't wait any longer, he wanted to be the first to sample the many delights that Madeline apparently had to offer. In no time, his trousers were down and tangled around his ankles. Linton's trousers followed, falling to his shoes. Madeline didn't know where to look so she looked discretely inwards at her cursor as it hovered on weapon 4 and then she pressed her mole. Moments later she released one hell of a fart.

'Ooo, excuse me! Must be all this excitement!'

By the time Madeline had finished her sentence, they were out cold in a heap of bare legs, and other appendages. From her onboard help files, she had about 45 minutes to do what she'd got to do before the effects of the gas wore off. She took some doggy-chocs out of Linton's pocket and left quietly, closing the door behind her.

She managed to get to within a few feet of the steps leading up to Gogli's room when suddenly and noisily, out of the darkness, Ricky and Rocky flew towards her. Madeline was prepared and gently tossed the doggy chocs in the direction of their growling mouths. Instantly the dogs scampered off, quietly satisfied into the darkness. Another guard, apparently controlling the dogs, or not controlling the dogs, also came ferociously bounding up to her. She knew doggy chocs would not work on him so she decided to test one of her other weapons. He bawled at her in some strange language while she twiddled with her mole.

Tools, weaponry, weapon 1 (taser).

She pointed her third and fourth finger (on the hand of the arm with the mole) roughly at the guard and pressed her mole.

'Wow, that's impressive!' she said excitedly, not specifically to the

guard.

Unfortunately, the two barbs on the end of the thin wires that hurtled out of her fingers missed the guard completely and gave the wooden door quite a serious electric shock. Nothing else for it, she had to fall back on good old-fashioned combat techniques and whacked the unsuspecting guard on the nose with her fist. She packed one hell of a punch. She *was* an android, after all. The guard with the severely bent and bloody nose, fell, unconsciously to the floor at her feet. Madeline pressed her mole again. The two thin wires complete with barbs retracted back neatly and rapidly into her fingers. She made a mental note to aim more carefully next time.

It was now or never. She took a deep breath and climbed a flight of stone steps up to what appeared to be the staff entrance. This small, rundown part of the castle was tacked on to the extensive pristine part of the castle – Gogli's living quarters. Madeline took another deep breath and hammered on the door. A few seconds later, a small, frail, prematurely aged woman, assumed to be Gogli's cook or maid or mother, opened the heavy corrugated iron door. Madeline adopted a door salesman's smile. The old crone was instantly horrified to see a half-dressed temptress towering above her.

'Well, are you going to let me in? I've been sent to entertain your… master, devil, son?'

There were two possible reasons why the old woman was horrified: Either she *was* Gogli's mother and thought Madeline was a prostitute and her son was far too young and handsome for such a trollop to have the privilege of experiencing his animal urges, or because she had allowed a stranger to enter her master's castle and possibly jeopardise his safety. Madeline didn't care about her troubled state. Boldly, she barged past her and into the kitchen area. The room was smelly, damp and dark but obviously, a kitchen as there were vegetables prepared on a large central wooden table. There was also a highly uncomfortable and grubby looking single bed in one dark corner of the room where this old woman presumably slept when she was allowed to. Madeline crossed through the kitchen into a long corridor with walls covered in pictures. Above and beneath the pictures were other various artefacts. All the pictures had the same overall theme of violence and death and the artefacts also shared the same theme. Madeline entered an open doorway on the left. The old lady followed closely behind her, ranting and raving.

The room was stiflingly hot due to an unnecessary log fire crackling away in the fireplace on the far wall. Contrarily, the room appeared clinically cold. The walls and floor were mostly tiled in grey or white.

A large oak desk dominated the room, untidily covered in empty milk-shake cartons, oven-ready chip boxes and three computer screens. One monitor displayed some kind of brutal combat game but the other two each displayed a set of pulsating, wobbly, horizontal lines. The rest of the room was furnished in cheap flat-pack furniture which, for some strange reason, was all wrapped tightly in something resembling cling film.

A lanky, spotty faced, Tara Gogli stood in the centre of the room in his 'Iron Man' themed pyjamas.

'Hello birthday boy, I've brought you a present, bet you can't guess what it is?' teased Madeline.

Gogli was momentarily bewildered and therefore speechless, perhaps because it didn't happen to be his birthday. Whether he could speak English would be discovered in the fullness of time. He was clearly an adolescent teenager and Madeline was probably the sexiest most beautiful, bonkable female he had ever set eyes on. His hormonal engines clouded the reality of the situation for quite some time. Suddenly he snapped to his senses.

'Fuckin' bitch! Why have you let this white shit in here?'

'I'm truly sorry my dearest son, she just barged in,' the old woman uttered feebly.

The conclusion drawn from this was that both could speak English and also, it seemed that they had a close and loving relationship with each other.

'I will have the guards whip you for this unholy outrage,' bawled Gogli.

It wasn't entirely clear who he was now talking to, but his mother assumed it was still her and continued to apologise now in a different tongue. Most likely it translated as, 'my dearest son, please forgive me, I beg you.'

'Fuck off and close the door behind you, I will decide how to punish you, later!' he bawled.

Gogli attempted to raise the guards on a two-way radio he conveniently had to hand but for some reason, there was no reply.

'Well, you certainly know how to speak to your mother,' Madeline commented.

'Why have you had the impertinence to enter my castle – my sacred room? What the fuck do you want? I demand to know!'

He had another attempt at raising the guards on the two-way radio. Naturally, there was no reply so he swore profusely and threw the radio on the floor. Meanwhile, Madeline turned the key and locked the door.

‘Answer my question, Bitch!’ Gogli ranted as he picked up a handgun.

Just as Madeline was about to truthfully say, I’ve come here to kill you, he fired two bullets into her chest. To the complete astonishment of Gogli, Madeline stayed upright and snatched the gun from him and tossed it to the other side of the room.

An important question was effectively answered. Apparently, Madeline *was* bulletproof. The inner Kevlar reinforced android framework had absorbed the force of the bullets, but unfortunately, now there were two untidy little holes in her new top and two corresponding holes in one of her breasts. Naturally, Madeline was extremely annoyed. Twice, this arsehole had tried to kill her. Her skin, she could repair later, but her new top, how the hell was she going to replace that out here?

Madeline was determined to do her job humanely and painlessly, but now she was justifiably pissed off. Once more the wires of her taser weapon flew out of her fingers and across the room, this time the barbs accurately hit Gogli’s chest.

‘Sit down!’ commanded Madeline.

He didn’t have a choice. The electric shocks jerked him uncontrollably backwards into a wooden rocking chair, conveniently situated behind him.

Madeline was finally face-to-face with the person who burnt her alive and killed over two thousand innocent people, including Simon and Bob, on that awful, awful day. Her heart raced, they were alone and he was at her mercy. Unfortunately for Gogli, she didn’t have any. The bursts of electric current jolted him to and fro, spreading agony throughout his body. Lacking even a morsel of pity or forgiveness, Madeline could happily have continued applying the current through his body for hours. However, after a minute or two she became irritated by the screams and was forced to press on. She retracted the taser wires (complete with barbs) back into her fingers and then took the elaborate tiebacks off the curtains. Before he could regain control of himself, she used the tiebacks to tie his arms to the arms of the chair and his legs to the legs of the chair.

‘Who… what the fuck, are you?’

‘A good question, give me a minute and I’ll tell you.’

‘Mother! Guards!’ yelled Gogli in his native tongue.

Madeline paused a second to allow him to settle. She had many questions to ask him before she had to do what she had to do, but they all boiled down into one basic word:

‘Why? Why? Why did you do it? Burn all those people to death?’

‘Untie me, now Bitch or I will set the devil on you!’

‘Interesting, I thought YOU were the devil. All those innocent people. Was it revenge? Hate? Go on, tell me, I’m curious?’

‘Because I can, okay? Untie me freak!’

His latter remark pummelled her mind. It hurt deeply because it was true, she was a freak and it was because of this evil bastard.

‘Do you get a thrill out of seeing lots of people suffer?’

‘I said… fucking untie me, freak!’

‘Yes, freak I maybe but at least I’m not a sick, deranged psychopath.’

Madeline realised that in truth, she was sick and possibly a little deranged but at least most of her sickness was physical.

‘Look you little brat, Tara, whatever you call yourself, I know you’re only a slip of a lad and anyone else your age would just get a smacked arse and no pocket money for a month and that would be the end of it. But that wouldn’t work for you, would it? So, on reflection, I’m not going to untie you. In fact, I’m going to make sure you’re tied up for the rest of your life.’

Gogli thought he had lost something in translation, but Madeline meant exactly that.

‘You see, you little arse wipe, you sent that autonomous fire squirting truck into the crowds and killed all those people. So, the powers-that-be have sent me, another sort of autonomous machine, here to kill you. Tit for tat really, I suppose.’

Gogli understood every word except for the last bit so he reiterated it,

‘Teet for tart?’

‘That’s about it matey!’

Gogli made a frantic attempt to free himself but it was futile. Madeline had tightened the knots as tight as she could. Now it was time to complete her mission. Her instructions were specific: to use *weapon 2* and *arsenic* but he had riled her far too much for a mere lethal injection. She calmly picked up the fire tongues, grasped a burning log

and placed it under the very same chair that he sitting on and tied to. She continued to pile burning logs under the chair until there was a welcoming, roaring fire, toasting his legs and nether regions.

'You'll laugh at this: I'm supposed to kill you with a humane lethal injection. They wanted you to have a nice painless quick death – hilarious, I know. I don't think that's right, do you? Wouldn't be fair to all the friends and relations of all those who you've painfully put to death, would it?'

'Mercy!' Gogli pitifully whimpered, clearly in pain. 'Please, untie me, I will pay you lots of money, I am very rich.'

As far as Madeline was concerned, it was over, she had no more to say. He would soon be dead. Perhaps the 'mercy' bit provoked a comment, but she ignored it. He begged and pleaded as tears rolled down his spotty teenage face. The underside of the chair was now on fire, it wouldn't be long now. Madeline (Poppy) would normally be the first to forgive and forget but certainly not this time. She refused to flinch from her objective. She was administering the same death to him as he had given to thousands of others.

'Listen… you can have… half my… fields!' Gogli struggled to get his words out.

'What fields?'

'The ones… you can see… out of the window.'

'The ones with the nice red flowers?'

'Yes, the… opium fields.'

'Red poppies? Of course, stupid me!'

The source of his power and wealth was now clear to her.

'Sorry, your time is up matey.'

'Okay, three quarters… ahhhh!'

Flames were now lapping up the sides of the chair. The tops of his trousers were now smouldering. Gogli was wailing and screaming. His life would conclude, experiencing the insufferable pain, first-hand, that he had so casually inflicted on thousands of others. His mother was behind the locked door pathetically shouting out her son's name. She muttered some other words but made no effort to force the door.

His shirt and hair were now on fire but amazingly, Tara Gogli was still conscious and screaming but Madeline was committed. To her, this was a perfect example where revenge was wholly justified. However, despite the blind hatred she had for him, she told herself it would be

inappropriate to watch, so she didn't. Gogli's screams built up to a crescendo and then suddenly stopped; his whole body was now on fire. Momentarily, Madeline turned around and caught sight of the burning flesh curling off his arms and face in thin intact sheets. She also noticed that the flames were now lapping up the walls, onto the ceiling and spreading rapidly outwards. This was the first time she had killed anyone and she felt completely comfortable with it. Aware of Tara Gogli in this pitiful state, brought it all back, the horrific incessant pain, the stench of burning flesh and the screams from thousands of people burning alive. She would never forget the horrendous images of that day. A molecule of a tear appeared in one of her eyes but instantly evaporated. Poppy may have sobbed for the ones fallen by this juvenile monster, but Madeline was made of sterner stuff. There was no time for dwelling on the past, she had an important job to do. She went over to his computer, logged out of the war simulation game now playing to itself and had a look at his document file. She hoped to find evidence of Wardate and its members. A File of names or even a newsletter would be enough but she was rapidly running out of time. She had to think and think fast. Unfortunately, Madeline (Poppy) had never been a computer whiz. True, she could get by as she had demonstrated with her mole but things like directories, folders and files were normally best avoided. She scanned the folder names in 'my documents' and then each file in each folder and then each file of each sub-folder and finally, against all expectations, it paid off, there it was:

The Residents of Wardate.

She clicked on the file – dozens of names were instantly displayed on the screen.

She had no time left; the room was ablaze. She quickly flicked through the remaining eleven pages of the document and then dashed towards the door, parting the smoke and flames with her hands. No last look at Gogli, he was dead and that's all that mattered.

Standing quietly behind the door, stood Gogli's mother and the guard with a broken nose. They made no fuss, no objection, no aggression, they just stared at the burning room and the unrecognisable remains of their former son and boss, blazing away in the chair. Naturally, they were shocked at what they saw, as they would be discovering any human being on fire but they were completely impassive. The fact that it was young Tara Gogli's flesh and bones spitting and crackling in the furnace that the room now had become, failed to induce any sadness or remorse from either of them.

The fire was now spreading savagely into other parts of the living

quarters. It wouldn't be long before the whole castle was ablaze. Madeline pushed passed them and ran out of the kitchen, across the courtyard and out of the castle entrance. She wasn't particularly bothered about the consequences of her actions. She had completed her mission and that was that. Tara Gogli was no more.

Someone asked the question, probably a child, 'Why are other children sometimes naughty?' The grown-up's answer was that children are not really naughty; they are just exploring their capabilities and boundaries. 'So,' said the person, probably a child, 'when they have done all that exploring, then do they get smacked?'

14. A possessive attendant.

By the time she had recovered her holdall from a hiding place and returned to her borrowed car, many locals were already out in the streets gossiping feverously. The good news quickly spread to all corners of the town and beyond. Many tables and chairs were dusted down, wine poured freely and dancing in the streets began. The town was now alive and had its soul back again. They all waved and cheered as Madeline drove past. They were truly thankful for the deed that she had done.

Madeline hadn't realised it until now but she was in a right old state. Apart from the two bullet holes in her chest which had punctured her right breast making the left one much bigger, she was smoke-stained from head to foot. Her hair had also frizzled with the heat. What she needed was a bit of an overhaul and a good hot soapy bath. She wondered if having a bath, in her new state, would feel as good as it used to do.

Naturally, she drove back the same way she had come. Now she knew the truth, the poppy fields no longer looked attractive as they did before. The moonlight gave the mass of flowers a sinister greyish hue.

She had seen very few people on the way to the castle but now, as she drove through Ndanga, people were everywhere. Every house had its lights on and groups of people gathered on every street corner, laughing and making merry. She drove past the row of houses where she had been abducted by the obnoxious men. She had no trouble identifying the particular house this time. They were outside sitting at a table, playing dominoes and drinking wine. Now shaved and wearing smart clean clothes, they had cleaned themselves up considerably. They gave a friendly wave as she drove past. She thought briefly about returning the car but decided against it, she needed to get to a hotel as soon as possible.

It wasn't the most ideal time for her new, high-tech body to suddenly shut down. Madeline assumed that the bullets, the heat and the fumes must have affected her complex systems. It was about forty seconds before she regained control of herself – and the car. Luckily, the roads in this part of the world were mostly empty and the land on either side was more or less flat. She had departed from the road a good

hundred metres back and in the glare of the headlights, a rather large olive tree rapidly loomed. In the nick of time, she managed to swerve away from the hard and unforgiving object.

With that incident over and the tree unscathed, a new problem unexpectedly arose. She suddenly realised the importance of the light blinking in her field of vision. It was a non-urgent amber but now was panic-stations red. Her new mechanical body was dangerously low on fuel.

Juice guzzler came to mind in more ways than one. It didn't seem long ago that she'd downed a full bottle of cooking oil, but then again, she had been particularly busy. Her body was either running on fumes or she was on backup batteries. She grappled with her holdall hoping there was a life-saving bottle of cooking oil inside but no such luck. A convenient supermarket just around the corner was too much to wish for. If she ran out of fuel and her backup batteries went flat, she would at best be in one hell of a mess or at worst, die. She was convinced that there was no longer the faint vibration of a diesel engine coming from her chest. Her limbs definitely weren't as responsive as they normally were. She was definitely on battery power. 'Shit!' A filling station appeared in the distance – there was nothing else for it.

It was a basic, no-frills, garage with two shabby pumps on the forecourt: petrol and diesel. Both pumps had seen better days and so had the old lady attendant who came out to serve her.

'Diesel?' Madeline gestured more than said. It was clear from the onset that the old woman wouldn't understand English. Madeline tried her best to get across the phrase, 'can I fill her up myself?' but failed. Naturally, she desperately wanted to do it herself but the old lady was having none of it, after all, it was her pump, her nozzle and until Madeline had paid for it, her diesel. The old woman undid the filler cap and started to fill the car tank. A good old bit of flatulence would be useful here, Madeline thought but unfortunately, another warning light happened to be flashing in her field of vision, she had used up all the fart gas. No time to lose, she snatched the nozzle off the old woman. Diesel gushed everywhere right up to the point when the nozzle entered her mouth. The attendant made no attempt to save Madeline from her bizarre actions as she was too busy fainting, in a heap, in a pool of diesel. Madeline hoped she had the nozzle far enough in her mouth for the pump 'cut off' to work. With the fast rate of fuel delivery, it was only a few seconds before the 'cut off' engaged and the fuel stopped flowing. At this point, Madeline's circuits also 'cut off' so she collapsed in a heap in the same pool of diesel that the

attendant was occupying. Her body had used its last burst of battery power to snatch the nozzle away from the old woman. Auto shutdown had initiated and for all appearances, she was motionless and dead.

It wasn't until this moment that it dawned on her that she wasn't in this foreign country. She was and had always been in a steel tank in England, not that there were any clues to that effect. For the second time in half-hour, with no output from her Madeline android body, she existed in nothing more than darkness and silence again. This would be the worst kind of death, she thought, staying alive for years like this with complete sensory deprivation. With the unexpectedness of the situation, she completely forgot about her built-in entertainment system. While her android body was hopefully sorting itself out, she could have been watching television or even listening to some music. After what seemed like hours but was only ten minutes, the sight of the ground and an old woman standing over her came into view. The trusty little diesel engine inside her had somehow restarted and brought her android body back to life. Naturally, the old female attendant had never, in her entire life, seen anything like this before. Firstly, she saw this strange western woman drink neat diesel from the nozzle. Then she regained consciousness to find this western woman dead on the ground next to her and then, after she had been dead for a while, she miraculously came back to life. Not only that, she noticed that the western woman had two bullet holes in her chest and had one boob much bigger than the other. This was enough to make her faint again, so this is what she did.

After making the old lady comfortable with a grubby cushion from the back seat of the car, Madeline got back into the car and continued her journey. Her diesel-soaked clothes now complimented her smoked complexion and dark frizzled hair. How, the hell, was she going to get a room in a hotel in this state? As it turned out, her credit card was not charred, diesel soaked or had bullet holes in it so there was no problem. She chose the best hotel she could find within a short drive from the airport. The two blatant bullet holes in her top caused a certain amount of concern at the reception desk but Madeline insisted that she was fine, they were only grazes, so they got on with the booking. Clearly, they saw this kind of thing all the time.

She didn't know if her new hi-tech body could cope with the ordeal of having a nice warm bath. There was only one way to find out so she had one, with plenty of bubbles. Miraculously and realistically, she experienced the warmth of the water surrounding her body.

'Not bad, not bad at all,' she muttered.

This was the first time she had relaxed like this since… for as long as

she could remember. Of course, in reality, she was, sort of, relaxing all the time in a saline solution in her tank. However, as to be expected, she was beginning to lose track of exactly what was reality. The soapy water cleansed her diesel and soot-stained silicone skin very effectively. She doubted whether her former beautiful artificial hair would restore to how it was, but she washed it with the hotel provided shampoo and hoped for the best.

Before she climbed into the bath, she had performed a first-class repair job on her chest. A small repair kit had been in her holdall all along, but she decided to leave the holes until she was in the privacy of her hotel room. There, she could take her time and mend herself in privacy. As for the repair, the tricky bit was locating and then extracting the two bullets. A certain amount of poking, prodding and squeezing was required. After that, it was more or less straightforward. From a small tube, she squirted skin-coloured silicone into the holes, smoothed it off with a wet knife and after ten minutes the liquid skin had completely set. It was almost impossible to see where the holes had been.

The soak beneath the suds gave her time to recall and ponder on the events and actions of the last few hours. She accepted that she was now a fully-fledged assassin and disturbingly, it wasn't as traumatic as she thought it would be. She actually felt good about ending this particular person's life even if he was a juvenile. Of course, it was wholly to do with revenge – the sweet sort. It was all perfectly justified because she had suffered unimaginably. To put it bluntly, her life had been ruined and fucked up. Gogli's life had also been ruined and fucked up – he was dead. No one else would suffer from his evil ways ever again. The people of that area no longer lived under a cloud of fear. Thanks to a mysterious, seemingly indestructible English female, they were now in high spirits and liberated.

'Yes, I could kill again if it was justified,' she concluded.

She continued to recall how relatively straightforward it had been. Considering Gogli was supposed to have been highly protected, it was almost too easy. Now it dawned on her why *they* had opted to build a female rather than a male android. Her most powerful weapon of all was being beautiful, sexy and female. Her sexual prowess and exuberance had succeeded where a team of male commandos with an arsenal of gunfire may have failed.

She wondered if the pages of Wardate names, she momentarily glanced at, had been stored somehow in her system or if Turner had been watching and had a photographic memory. In one way, she quite liked the thought of someone watching over her. On the positive side,

it was protective and comforting. On the negative side, she hated it. She had no privacy, nowhere to retreat to and no isolation. Would she ever be able to hide in her goldfish bowl existence? She wiggled her little mole on her arm to see if there was a rewind facility within her menus, but she was side-tracked…

She had an incoming e-mail – a message from Turner:

'Excellent work, my dear. Preferred your way.
Arsenic far too tame. Your next target is:
Raymond De Par, Belarus,
Regards Turner.'

'So, he is watching…'

15. Newly appointed assassin

So, what exactly has *he* done to annoy humanity? Madeline asked herself. She typed his name into the search engine. This wasn't easy with just a brown squashy mole on her arm but she was improving with practice. It was a long process, opening up a keypad in her bottom right field of vision, aiming her cursor at the correct letter and pressing the mole. Surely there was a 'voice search' somewhere, there had to be an easier way.

Raymond De Par was a professor – a gene biologist who, according to several sites on the internet, had discovered cures for a variety of lethal biological diseases. However, this wasn't the complete story. True, De Par had developed antitoxins for a total of nine horrible diseases. Strangely, though, none of these diseases had been heard of until just before the antitoxins were available. It was a foregone conclusion that this mad, evil professor firstly genetically created a disease and then conveniently offered an antitoxin to cure it – for an exorbitant price.

He was the ultimate extortionist. No one dared say a word against him for fear of a lethal disease being unleashed on the general public – *without* an antidote at hand. Keeping him sweet, was the recommended worldwide government strategy and by keeping him this way, problems hopefully wouldn't arise. However, perish the thought if anyone did happen to upset this lunatic, he could quickly wipe out much of the human race. There were isolated cases where people had died from mysterious diseases, suspected of being De Par's making, but nothing could ever be positively proved.

This time Madeline would have to tread very carefully.

This latest assignment somewhat puzzled the newly appointed exterminator come assassin. Madeline was comfortable with her first target. After all, she had good reasons why she should end Tara Gogli's life. This mad Professor De Par, however, hadn't as yet done anything to anger or irritate *her*. True, he may be extorting money, so what? Lots of people had extorted money from Madeline when she used to be Poppy: Her local garage when her car broke down. The plumber when she had a radiator leak. Her bank when she went £2 overdrawn… she could go on. Perhaps, who knows, on balance he

may be been doing slightly more good than bad, in this crazy world. However, this was her job now, not a news correspondent anymore. She was a fully-fledged assassin. She pondered with this dilemma for a moment or two and then concluded, who was she to question the call of her government?

The bath water had become less than lukewarm. She had been in the bath for almost an hour and a half but despite this, the skin on her fingers had failed to go all pruney. She was definitely not human. The water was a dirty shade of grey, but her silicone skin was restored to its previous golden flesh tone. Silicone took very little drying and her artificial hair, once dried, had miraculously restored to a shiny manageable condition although perhaps curlier than it was. A curl or two here and there certainly didn't do her a disservice. She lay on the bed, naked and exhausted and promptly fell asleep.

16. The circus act

She woke, still naked and it was suddenly morning. The baking sun shone through the full-length patio window into the hotel room. It wasn't the same room, the same hotel or the same town but it was in the same country and that fact brought memories flooding back. It seemed as though the rooms in all four-star hotels were exactly the same in this part of the world: The same colour scheme, the same bedding, the same items of furniture and the same squashed insects on the walls. Perhaps it was her imagination, perhaps it was an inexplicable coincidence, but it looked like the same room she stayed in on that day before she was roasted alive.

Now she was a completely different person with a new, much nicer, more flattering name. Poppy Cock meant bilge and claptrap, Madeline Bull conjured up strength and steadfastness.

She remembered how she used to attempt some morning stretches when she had a *real body*. It wasn't particularly yoga but yoga's what she called it if anyone asked. It was unlikely that there would be any benefits in *yoga for androids* but she had heard about *yoga for cats* which is just as ridiculous. She stood up and decided to experiment to see if she was any better as a machine, at touching her toes, than Poppy used to be. Instantly she realised that humans and androids have many fundament differences. Her new joints didn't contain such things as ligaments and cartilages, they just had… oil. There were no horrible cracking noises, no tearing sounds and no pain. Not only could she touch her toes, but grab hold of them with no effort. That's interesting, she thought. She straightened up and decided to attempt something a little more challenging and do the same motion backwards. To her amazement, this was just as easy. She tried to straighten up but instead, her spine curled and she found herself looking up the crack of her own cute little bottom. Good god, I can check my piles! Eventually, she recovered and sprawled out on what passed as a rug beside the bed. For the next few minutes, she tested her mobility to the limit - rotating, twisting and knotting her limbs and spine in the most unimaginable way possible. Inevitably the result was a tangle of legs, arms and twisted spine that was impossible to recover from. Despite this slight setback, she had the satisfaction of knowing that she had achieved the most advanced yoga position ever

and from this day forth it would be known as the *madbullhasana*.

Conveniently, just at that moment a young female maid burst into the room, instantly averted her eyes, apologised and retreated back to the door.

Since Madeline had adopted her new body, almost all of her sense of decorum and dignity had been lost. Much of it went weeks ago, lying naked on a table in front of the scientists. Undeniably, Madeline was now a fully-fledged exhibitionist and apparently… a circus act.

'Hang on, no, don't go. I wonder if you could just… I'm a bit knotted up, can you…?'

'Oh, my goodness! Madam is incredible. You are very talented to do that. Are you from circus?'

'Nope, just a hobby.'

'My niece is… how you say? Double-jointed, but…'

The maid continued to talk in broken English, about her niece while she assisted Madeline in straightening out her contorted body. As soon as she was able, she grabbed the bed sheet and covered herself up.

'Do you know where I can buy some clothes around here?' asked Madeline, quickly dismissing the fact that she was inhumanly flexible.

'Yes, madam, many shops 100 metres from hotel. Today is market. Also, I have parcel for you, please.' said the maid in more broken English.

She gave Madeline a small neatly wrapped box.

'I return later for cleaning room?'

'Yes, of course, thank you.'

The maid left the room and Madeline dressed herself in the best, least soiled clothes she had. She then opened the parcel, it contained two small pressurised canisters and a brief note from Turner:

"*Inside your navel, you will find a small refill point. Select 'weapon 4' and then 'refill', simple as that! Keep one for spare, regards Turner."*

She raised her blouse and pressed the canister into her naval, she felt just like a cigarette lighter being refuelled.

Madeline was eager to venture out and track down a bargain or two. She loved shopping but more so, loved being fashionably dressed. It was a tonic for her soul and she owed it to herself.

Unfortunately, one of the many irritating things about life is that

whenever you plan ahead, something always happens to completely bugger it up. Madeline tried her best to make it a continuous process of dropping her room keys off at the reception desk and heading for the exit, but at the last possible moment, the receptionist called out,

'Miss Bull, excuse me, this letter has just arrived for you.'

After examining the contents of the letter, Madeline only had one thing to say, 'Bollocks!'

A flight ticket to Minsk, departing at 11:30 am, ever so slightly messed up Madeline's plans. If she immediately hailed a taxi to drop her off at the airport, raced through check-in and pushed her way through passport control, she might just make the flight. Was there any point in objecting? Clearly, her schedule was being tightly controlled. She knew this was one of the conditions of having a new body and it was a small price to pay. Hopefully, a time would come when there wouldn't be such a rush, a time when every second didn't count, a time when all these evil Wardate people were well and truly dead. How many had she got to kill before she could enjoy a bit of shopping?

17. A new friend

There was a new and justified sense of urgency. Raymond De Par had stepped up the game by informing the world of a deadly new virus. De Par hadn't actually infected anyone with it as yet, but world experts predicted that if he did, this could well be the mother of all diseases: A disease that had no cure, a disease that would spread around the world like daybreak, eventually killing billions of people. Because of this particular threat, every day that he now lived was one too many. Hydrogen bombs have the potential to kill millions of people but at least, as a small mercy, the majority die very, very quickly. Diseases like AIDS, malaria, cholera, and Ray De Par "specials" also have the potential to kill millions but slowly and painfully. Heaven forbid, if there was ever this choice, it's a no-brainer which one to go for.

Madeline had no option, an exclusive lady's wear shop in the airport departure lounge had to do. She hastily chose a couple of tops and a skirt without trying them on – no time. She didn't even have time to engage her stealth system, consequently, the metal detector howled at her as if she was smuggling through an arsenal of Kalashnikovs. On the second attempt, with her stealth system on, she was as clean as a Nun in bleached pyjamas. This was very puzzling to the airport security. Despite all this, she successfully boarded the plane, but with only seconds to spare.

Her journey to Belarus involved two stages, firstly taking a flight to Sweden, then on to Minsk. The first flight, even though the longest leg of the journey, passed reasonably quickly and trouble-free but the flight to Minsk was a complete contrast. After a ridiculously short transfer time, she boarded a small thirty-seater plane. Inside was claustrophobic and rudimentary; outside it boasted of having as many as two turboprops to suck or blow her to her destination.

She sat next to a casually dressed young man who gave a new meaning to lanky. Despite his thick, unmanageable, brown hair and his all-blue colour scheme, including his eyes, there was something about him that instantly put Madeline at ease. It certainly wasn't his intention to flirt, he just happened to be naturally friendly and charming. Madeline couldn't speak a word of Russian or whatever his native tongue happened to be. The way she saw it; everybody could speak English if they really tried to. English was her language, her

only language so it was up to everyone else to make the effort. Consequently, the young man had to do all the work himself. Madeline refrained from giving too much away about her visit to Belarus apart from saying she was going to do a bit of shopping. This was, of course, wishful thinking. Who knows, maybe she would have time to enjoy herself and buy clothes after she had done what she had to do.

The state of her attire had become a statement in itself. Her scruffy, holey, singed and skimpy dress code was accepted as intentional. To the casual observer, perhaps, a new fashion trend which inadvertently added to Madeline's allure. Eventually, she planned on changing into her newly purchased clothes, but as yet she hadn't had the opportunity.

The man's name was Mikael. He was Finnish but lived in Mazyr which, coincidentally, just happened to be where Ray De Par based himself.

'Isn't that… where that person who's discovered all those cures for diseases comes from?' probed Madeline.

'If that's what you've heard,' replied Mikael cynically.

'I would like to meet him, this *Dee Par*, whatever his name is. See where he does all his *good* work and… invaluable research,' said Madeline, totally aware she was flagrantly inverting the truth.

It was her way of deviously fishing for information. She hoped for a reaction and she got one.

'*D' Pa*, is how you pronounce it!' snapped Mikael, continuing in a troubled tone. 'Trust me, you don't want to meet him. Don't believe the stories you've heard. He is responsible for many deaths and missing people.'

She had touched a nerve. Mikael was clearly bitter about something relating to De Par. Before she could change the subject, the captain's distorted voice bellowed over the intercom. He complained about severe radio interference and how it was affecting the guidance system and radio-com of the aeroplane. Sternly, he asked everyone to make sure their mobile phones and any other electrical devices were turned off. He instructed the one and only steward to search the plane. Madeline had a hunch that it may well be one of the many devices within her frame causing the problem. She checked if she had turned her stealth system off – she had. Only one thing for it, she couldn't risk the safety of the flight, she had to close down the radio link to the lab until the plane had landed. Madeline had no idea how her new body would behave with no commands from her real body in the tank.

Perhaps she would appear dead or maybe just fast asleep. She fastened her seat belt, wiggled her mole once more, found the correct menu and deactivated her radio connection.

Timing would be critical. Now that she had no access to her mole, she had to find an alternative way of activating her body and preferably around the moment the plane landed. It was puzzling why the other flights she had been on, including the first leg of this journey, tolerated her as a passenger without any ranting from the pilot. Perhaps it was because this particular plane was comparatively low tech or… perhaps the Braugenhau transmitter inside her head had developed a problem.

As it happened, she discovered that her mole still worked even though it wasn't physically there. Providing she aimed for the exact spot, just going through the motions of mole wiggling was sufficient. Now that problem was covered, she used the time to good use by watching a few YouTube videos. She could have watched television but there was absolutely nothing on. Madeline activated her body roughly at the time when the plane should have landed.

Unfortunately, the flight was ahead of schedule. By the time she had reactivated herself, all the passengers had disembarked leaving Mikael and the steward standing over her. They both tried several times to wake her out of her deep slumber not knowing exactly where to touch her without it being misinterpreted as groping.

'She's coming round,' said the steward.

'Sorry, must have dozed off,' fibbed Madeline.

'When you sleep you certainly sleep,' said Mikael. 'You missed all the fun. A man was sitting across from us with some sort of communication device. They've just escorted him off the plane.'

'You mean a mobile phone?'

'No, looked like a satellite phone or something. A right cocky chap, loud too.'

'Trust me to miss all the excitement.'

'He kept staring across at you.'

'Probably some pervert,' rebuffed Madeline, dismissing any possible concerns. However, she was, after all, drop-dead gorgeous. Men could be forgiven for the occasional innocent ogle.

They disembarked and made their way to the check-in together. By the time they had passed through a very officious passport control and unbelievable slow baggage reclaim, they were very good friends. His

full name was Mikael Ottis. Madeline welcomed his friendship but decided that for now, she didn't want any more than that. Madeline revealed, not intentionally, that she hadn't, as yet, arranged anywhere to stay. Kindly, he told her he had a spare room and she was welcome to stay at his place for the night if she wanted to. At first, Madeline declined but then it dawned on her that it was getting late, she couldn't speak the local language and most important of all, she had made a new friend, so she changed her mind.

They both caught a bus from the airport, this was a novel experience in itself. The last time she caught a bus was to and from school. Then she had a different body which was still growing and insufferably adolescent. Then, she didn't like her hair, her skin, her breasts, her legs, her teeth, her hands, in fact, the only thing she did like was moaning and complaining and *Take That*. What an obnoxious, ungrateful bitch I was, she thought. Despite this, she desperately wanted to go back to those days and be different, not end up working for the BBC, not being a foreign News correspondent and not getting burnt to an inch of her life. However, you can't change fate and it was because of fate that Madeline Bull was now a reality.

Apparently, it was also through fate that she had met Mikael.

The bus took them through some beautiful countryside, they passed countless quaint Tyrolean-type cottages and finally pulled up right outside Mikael's equally quaint little cottage.

Mikael was in many ways, like his home. He was charming, cosy and adequate. He cooked what appeared to be a lovely meal for her. She longed to be able to eat it, taste it and smell it, but unfortunately, cooking oil had to do. She sneaked a bottle of Mazola from her holdall and visited the bathroom.

Then she had a rethink, would the occasional meal really do all that much damage to her new body? What the hell, I'll risk it, she thought. She ate the tasteless odourless spaghetti bolognese with gusto.

'Madeline, you're welcome to stay here as long as you want.'

'Thanks, that's kind of you but…'

'Look, I hope you don't think I'm being forward, it's just that I have a spare bedroom which doesn't seem to get much use… any use, actually.'

'That would be very kind of you… if it's no trouble. Hopefully, I'm only going to be here for a day or two.'

'You're welcome to ring your husband… boyfriend, on the landline, if you want?'

‘Thanks, I did have a boyfriend, he’s gone now.’ said Madeline quietly.

‘I’m sorry. You mean he’s no longer with us?’

‘No, it’s me who is no longer with us.’

‘Madeline, you talk in riddles, you’re a very confusing person.’

‘Yes, I am. You live here on your own then?’ said Madeline, changing the subject.

‘Yes, yes, I do now.’

Madeline didn’t want to take this line of conversation any further. She had established that they were both on their own and both were uneasy about it. She would leave it at that. They continued to sip the wine and gaze into the crackling fire. It was so much more welcoming than the last crackling fire.

‘So, tell me more about yourself?’ prompted Mikael.

‘Well, you certainly wouldn’t like to know too much about me at the moment.’

Mikael completely misunderstood, possibly owing to the state of the few clothes she was just about wearing. He thought she was referring to her personal hygiene. How was he to know that Madeline was an android that didn’t sweat, poo or pee? She wondered if it would always be a challenge for her to keep up the illusion of not being a machine. As time went by, she hoped it would become effortless, but right now, in front of Mikael, she thought she was failing completely. Mikael couldn’t control himself any longer and burst out laughing. Madeline didn’t know how to react. Mikael tentatively pointed at her mouth.

She suspected the worse. Her lips could have turned a funny colour, her nose could have fallen off or even her cute little chin could have developed some kind of hideous disfiguration. Of course, it was none of that. Mikael suggested that she looked in the mirror above the fireplace.

A particular hazard with spaghetti bolognese is its tomato content and how it stains everything it touches, in this case, Madeline’s perfectly realistic silicone skin.

‘I think I’d better visit the bathroom, don’t you?’

For the first time, Madeline was slightly embarrassed.

‘You’re welcome to have a bath while you’re in there. Fresh towels in the airing cupboard and plenty of hot water.’

She had no intention of refusing the offer. Madeline knew a rub down with a damp cloth would be perfectly adequate to remove the day's grime, but she couldn't turn down the offer of a nice hot bath. Her new body had suffered no ill effects after the last hot bath and besides, it was a good place to think.

Mikael's pleasant company had reminded her again that her new life was, on balance, a terribly lonely one. She longed to contact her old friends but she couldn't. Why couldn't she?! She protested to herself and then she painfully remembered, once more, that she was officially dead. She no longer had an official identity: a national insurance number or a birth certificate, these were human things. Even the authenticity of her passport was questionable. It was a concern that she could disappear just as easily as she appeared. Something else that inwardly concerned her was that she looked nothing like her former self. She was slightly taller, certainly slimmer and arguably younger-looking although it was hard to put an age on her. Between seventeen and thirty would be as accurate as you could get. Poppy was thirty-three before the fire incident, now you could add two hundred to that, in her present state. Surely, if it ever came to it, in a future time, it would be impossible to convince Adam or her mother that she was Poppy deep inside her. Then, like a body blow, the painful reality dawned. This wasn't a temporary thing. She was an android and an un-ageing android until the day she died.

She longed for friendship and company. She also longed for the normal, human things in life like going on a diet, getting drunk, lying in, doing gardening, getting married, having children, having grandchildren…

'Okay, okay, stop right there!' she uttered to herself just before the tears began to form. 'I'm Madeline Bull and that's the end of it.'

As the warm water lapped around her new and perfectly formed body, her mind drifted onto more pertinent thoughts. She convinced herself that she didn't want sex. After all, she was a virgin again, as good as, and surely there were ethical issues that had to be considered. This meant he had to be the right person, he had to be compatible, basically, he had to be another Android. Madeline laughed; she was pretty certain that Mikael wasn't an android. She hoped Mikael would be contented if later, they could just talk, have a laugh, relax and watch television. However, unless Mikael was impotent, celibate or gay, he would undoubtedly want to bonk her at some stage in the evening.

Her thoughts now drifted away from the complicated life she had taken on board and focused on examining her new self. Her skin was

remarkably similar to the old skin she used to have, less the freckles and the fake tan. It was her hands that fascinated her the most. There was a slight, almost imperceptible delay with her new fingers reacting to the movement of her real fingers but hardly worth demanding your money back for. None of the dexterity was lost. They truly were a remarkable feat of engineering. She could do all the things with her new hands that she used to be able to do with her old ones. Up to now, she hadn't had to write anything but she was confident she still could hold a pen and sign her name. 'Signature,' she thought. She had a new name now, Madeline Bull, M Bull, Mad Bull. Madeline was fiddly to write so she settled on Mad Bull and practised signing it on her perfect thigh in the suds. The skin on her leg behaved authentically with just the right amount of elasticity as she drew her finger along the perfectly tanned skin. She examined her feet, they were also perfect. In fact, everything was perfect, perhaps too perfect. To the more critical observer, would this be a giveaway that something was not quite right about her?

The bathwater was cooling off, it was high time she got out. Her skin almost instantly dripped dried, but a towel still came in useful for covering herself up. With her dignity just about intact, she crept into Mikael's bedroom to look for a dressing gown. Fortunately, Mikael was elsewhere so she had a quick glance around. It was an untidy and cluttered room with a large single bed, a double wardrobe, a photograph of a pretty young woman on the bedside cabinet and a dressing gown hanging on the back of the door.

It wasn't the best time for it to happen again. To lose control of her body, now, of all times, was downright inconvenient. Before she could grab the dressing gown, her eyesight failed, resulting in a frozen picture. Then she lost all function of her body movement and her hearing became severely distorted. The last time this happened was when she was driving on a dusty road somewhere in Africa. Then the roads were empty and there was no one about, now there were lots of objects in the room which she would inevitably collide with. Mikael would certainly hear the noise and investigate. This was particularly awkward because, as it happened, she was, but for the smallest of towels, naked.

One of the main reasons why Madeline used to love her little pink mobile phone was because it never ever failed her (unless the battery suddenly went flat), it never let her down (unless she was in a black spot) and it never did anything which could possibly cause an embarrassing moment (unless it rang when she was in a meeting). To be honest, she hated computers because a five-minute job always, without exception, took two hours. She hated cars because they only

broke down when it was cold, raining and she was miles from anywhere. Now androids were about to be added to the list of irritating items of technology. Would she always be thwarted with connection problems? Was her radio connection not as good as they made out it was? Maybe this android thingy was not as good as it was cracked up to be.

As before, approximately forty seconds later, she was reconnected with herself – which happened to be in a heap on the floor with Mikael standing over her. Naturally, the towel had come adrift and naturally, all her lady bits were enticingly facing upwards. She made a pact with herself that this would not happen again even if it meant staying fully clothed for the rest of her life.

'Are you OK? You ought to see a doctor, passing out like that.'

'Sorry, I'm fine, honest… I must be tired.'

'Are you sure you haven't hurt yourself? I heard you fall from the kitchen.'

Mikael may well have been swamped with animal urges but he remained the perfect gentleman. He grabbed his dressing gown, the one that Madeline was aiming for before she inconveniently shut down and offered it to her, doing his best to avert his eyes. She wondered if all Finnish men were like this or if he was just an exception… or if he was gay?

Within minutes Mikael had produced two drinks of hot chocolate, behaving as though the embarrassing moment had never happened. Madeline absolutely adored hot chocolate and yearned for some of the taste and smell to penetrate the airwaves and reach Poppy in the tank. The flames of the log fire danced to their own tune not far from the old and functional brown leather armchairs which they occupied. Mikael's thick dark blue dressing gown complimented Madeline's permanent blue eyeshadow and Mikael's slippers swallowed up Madeline's perfectly formed feet. She gave no thought as to what Mikael would wear without these items, that was his problem.

'Bublé OK?' Mikael waved a CD at her.

'Yea… fine.'

Madeline couldn't help but feel at home and relaxed. She was acutely aware that she was being blatantly seductive no matter how hard she tried not to be. Ironically, as Poppy, she did her best to be seductive through the lens of the camera when reporting, but now as Madeline, she really wished she had a 'seductive off' switch. Mikael tried not to look too intently in Madeline's direction, trying to stare mostly into

the depths of the flames of the fire. He did his best to ignore the reality of the situation and talk about other boring, non-sexual things: How he was born in Finland, studied English and Russian at Stockholm University and eventually established a career in journalism. Madeline listened, trying her best not to yawn. More pertinent information would be why someone as outgoing as Mikael, lived on his own in a sparsely populated place in deepest Belarus. While she was *switched off* on the plane, she devoted a minute or two to reading up on this part of the world that she had barely heard of and never visited before. A short paragraph, she found, satisfactorily summed up the entire country:

Belarus being fairly close to the bustle of Western Europe but with historical Russian connections has been described as the centre of Europe. In reality, however, Belarus is considered an oppressed and poor country often ignored and overlooked.

This, Madeline assumed, was why De Par had made this place his home and place of 'work'. She would later realise that for associated reasons, Mikael had also made Belarus his home.

'What else do you know about De Par?' asked Madeline innocently.

Mikael instantly lost his coyness. Clearly, De Par was not his flavour of the month.

'Could we talk about something else?' he said as civilly as possible.

'Sorry, didn't mean to touch a nerve… OK, it's time I came clean, that's why I'm here, to research into this so-called "king of the cures" and see if it's all true,' confessed Madeline.

'Well, well, Madeline, you really are full of surprises. For a start, it certainly is *not* all true. Take my advice, stay a few days, enjoy this beautiful country and my company, of course, then go home and research something or someone else.'

'Believe me, I would love to, but my boss has sent me here and he doesn't take kindly to failure. I just thought you might be able to help me a little?'

'Madeline, I am helping you, believe me. No good will come to you if you persist with your research. All is not as it seems. They don't come any more evil and twisted than Raymond De Par.'

'Mikael… I know he's evil, that's really why I'm here,' said Madeline with a sudden change of tone.

'Sorry, I'm not following. You said you're here to research De Par.'

Madeline would have been happy to tell Mikael all about her severe

burns, how she was now a killing android machine, and how lonely she was. However, for now, she had to be a little sparing with the truth. She leant forward in her chair and spoke in a lowered voice.

'I'm on a mission sent by the British government.'

It felt good as she said it, especially the 'British government' bit. It made her feel important and actually, it was reasonably accurate. However, Madeline was aware that Mikael would find this information slightly inappropriate and slightly unbelievable. Her deceptively delicate and perfectly fashioned appearance certainly did not correspond with what she had just said.

Contrary to Madeline's whisper, Mikael spoke in a raised voice ending with a distinct chuckle.

'You're kidding, right? No offence Madeline, but are you the best they've got?'

'And what the hell's up with me?'

'Nothing Madeline, absolutely nothing, that's the point. You are perfect, too perfect. That's what De Par hates the most, perfection. He'll just love infecting you with some kind of skin disfiguration disease just for spite.'

'I can handle myself.'

'OK, look, I tried it once, tried to expose him… got too close…'

Mikael was about to lower his defences and say something he desperately wanted to share, but his voice choked and a tear began to well.

Any hormonal disturbance, brought on by his animal urges, had now dissipated. Frustration of another sort was now tormenting his being. Silence ensued, allowing an opportunity for Madeline to mull over some pertinent facts in her mind:

Mikael was a journalist, obviously a talented multilingual journalist who now lived here, far away from his home country. There had to be a reason for this.

He had tried something involving De Par and now there was no sign of a wife or girlfriend, just a photograph beside his bed.

Clearly, something awful had happened, too awful to comfortably talk about.

Madeline took a deep breath, paused for a moment, leant as far forward as she could without actually falling off the armchair and in a soft voice asked,

‘Who is that photograph of, beside your bed?’

Mikael didn’t reply, he couldn’t.

‘Sorry, I wasn’t snooping. I couldn’t help notice it, just before I tumbled to the ground… I’ll try not to let that happen too often!’ chirped Madeline, casually brushing the embarrassing incident to one side.

Mikael returned a smile but said nothing. Madeline now realised, all the while she had known him, he had been the height of politeness, gallantly putting on a brave face. In truth though, he was clearly saturated with sadness, remorse and frustration.

‘Your Wife? Your girlfriend?’ asked Madeline gently. A few moments went by before Mikael spoke.

‘Maria, she *was* my Fiancée.’

Before Madeline could stop herself, the obvious question gently slid out of Madeline’s lips.

‘Why, what happened to her?’

‘She died… died from a virus.’

‘I’m so sorry, how did she…?’

Mikael finished off her question, ‘catch it? She caught it because of my own carelessness and stupidity. It was a manufactured Ebola virus strain, a synthetic virus… it was meant for me!’

Mikael couldn’t contain himself any longer, his tears welled up sufficiently to overflow and his head fell into his hands. Madeline thought it best to give him a little space and go and make another two hot chocolates whether either of them wanted another drink or not. A few minutes later, with drinks in hand, Mikael proceeded to relate his sad and horrifying tale to Madeline.

Seven years ago, hardly anyone had heard of Raymond De Par. Mikael Ottis was one of the few, a fresh young inexperienced journalist. Mikael lived in Sweden, was engaged to a beautiful girl named Maria and life was good. Mikael wanted to make a noteworthy start to his career and there was a scientist who seemed to be making waves in virus research. The scientist’s name was Raymond De Par. He lived and worked in Belarus and was allegedly developing remarkable cures for rare and fatal diseases. Mikael thought he could do a lot worse than write an in-depth and perhaps revealing article about De Par. He said his farewells to Maria and set off alone on his exciting new venture. Little did he know that this was the last time he would see her alive.

After arriving in Belarus, Mikael repeatedly tried to make an appointment to see De Par but to no avail so he decided to do a cold call on his laboratory. This, as it happened, turned out to be the most regrettable thing he had ever done. Looking back, he realised that his approach was perhaps impetuous and in hindsight was a little hot-headed. He pestered De Par's understudies until he eventually got an interview with the man himself.

Many, including Mikael, had noticed that De Par only had antidotes or cures for newly discovered diseases – no cures for anything that had been around for a while. He bravely brought this matter up during the interview. He suggested to De Par that for all he knew, he was probably creating the diseases and then conveniently providing the cures. For a wet behind the ears, journalist, this was an unbelievably slanderous and reckless thing to say.

Little did he know, he had hit the nail precisely on the head.

Of course, De Par angrily refuted the outrageous suggestion. Mikael's inference had unwittingly brought about his death sentence. However, things didn't go according to De Par's plan.

Disappointingly, his interview with De Par produced no more than conjecture. Certainly, there was suspicion but no evidence whatsoever. Without concrete evidence, there was no story, no aspersions to cast and nothing to report back. It had been a complete waste of the company's money and Mikael's precious time away from Maria. To add insult, he had to spend three days in a hotel in Minsk because of a strike by airport ground staff.

He finally arrived home to find his house crawling with men in isolation suits and a full quarantine in force around the perimeter of his garden. Strangely, there was no sign of Maria.

Someone asked the question, probably a child, 'Why do we have diseases?' A grown-up wisely answered, 'There are two possible answers to this question and both are believed to be right although only one can be. The first answer, God made them, to punish us for our sins. The second answer, viruses and bacteria that cause diseases, evolved just like every other living thing on the planet.'

Naturally, this person, who asked the question, probably a child, was sweet, innocent and not yet adept in the science of biology, so believed the first answer and asked another question, 'If that's the case then, why didn't God make nice diseases for when we are good?'

The idea of developing "good for you" diseases was briefly considered by Ray De Par, but he simply wasn't that sort of person. He much preferred people to suffer.

Because Mikael was delayed for three days with the airport strike, Maria had taken it upon herself to open a package addressed to him. It was later assumed that in this package were several xenopsylla cheopis (rat fleas). They were carriers of some sort of fast-acting deadly virus, possibly a modified strain of the Ebola virus. Maria didn't stand a chance. She was dead within a few hours along with fifteen other people who came into contact with her (or the fleas). In the envelope was a slip of paper. Typed on the paper were the words: *Compliments of Wardate*.

From that day, De Par realised that he had an unprecedented power at his fingertips – a means to cause remote suffering or slaughter. Before that day, his threats were fairly low-key. Now he had discovered how easy it was to send new deadly diseases around the globe and infect people. All he had to do was to wait for an epidemic to develop from one of his poisonous parcels and then provide an antidote at an exorbitant price. It was extortion and blackmail on a worldwide scale. If there was an attempt to stop him or not pay the ransom, the antidote would not arrive and the epidemic would spread exponentially.

Much to the annoyance and irritation of many of the world's governments, the extorted money appeared to be used to fund research into even more deadly viruses and even more clever ways of infecting the world's population.

To make it even worse, there were clear signs that he was unstable and irrational. It, therefore, became a criminal offence for anyone, anywhere to upset, in any way, the infamous Raymond de Par. He had the whole world precisely by the short and curlies.

It was rumoured that in his immoral portfolio he had created, amongst others, MRSA, the H5N1 flu virus, Ebola, AIDS, Chlamydia and the Zika virus. Naturally, there wasn't and never would be any evidence to back up these claims and if there was, no one was allowed to present it. It was chillingly concluded by most of the world's governments that he had the power to wipe out the entire planet's population in a matter of days. Everyone agreed that something had to be done but exactly what and exactly by who?

Madeline knew now that this was an assassination that had to be carried out with extreme caution. She realised that she was completely unqualified to attempt such a mission. In fact, if she hadn't heard the full story from Mikael, she would have probably gone in clumsily with both feet. This would, most likely, have angered De Par enough to release a deadly virus and that would have been goodbye world population – thank you very much, Madeline!

'Thank God we met on the plane, definitely fate. Good job you returned from Finland when you did,' said Madeline.

'Actually, I never got any further than the airport. It was literally a round trip, thanks to some time-waster called Turner.'

'Turner!' Madeline exclaimed. 'Naughty, naughty,' she whispered to herself and to whoever was listening in on her.

'Yes, this Turner rang me, said he had something very important to tell me about De Par. He arranged to meet me in the departure lounge at the airport, but he sent me a text to say he couldn't make it. Damn waste of time. At least he paid for the flights,' said Mikael.

'I can assure you, it wasn't a waste of time, Turner has his methods,' Madeline assured him.

'You know this Turner? Why would he get me to do a round trip for nothing?'

'It wasn't for nothing, you met me!'

Mikael was justly puzzled and far from convinced with Madeline's British agent story. However, the fact was that Turner had arranged for them to meet up on the plane, even to the point of occupying adjacent seats. From the start, it had been a mission she couldn't do alone. It was a mission that required not only a disease tolerant android with killing capabilities but also a brave man with all the relevant background information.

Madeline had no doubts that Mikael was genuine and trustworthy. It was time he knew the truth about her. It was her turn to tell her own unique story. To hell with protocols and what she was not supposed to

do. This was a case where Mikael just had to know.

She told him about the fire, how she was burnt alive and how she was reborn as Madeline Bull. She told him about the price tag of this arrangement, that she was now an assassin for the British government and that officially she didn't exist. Mikael listened intently not knowing what to believe. For Mikael, the closest comparison he could make was 'Bionic woman' but *she* was pure fiction.

'So, what bits of you are bionic then?' asked Mikael, tongue in cheek.

Madeline ignored Mikael's glib remark, she didn't expect him to swallow her story completely, but at the very least take her moderately seriously. He would require proof for such an incredible story but that wouldn't be delivered until she had fully explained her remarkable existence. Firstly, she explained about herself in the tank and how she was connected to a computer which relayed the signals to this machine in front of him. Then she described how these signals operated the machine and mimicked all her actions and relayed her speech. The android before him sent back various information including sight, sound and touch signals back to her in the tank.

'And that's about it really. Any questions?'

Naturally, Mikael was lost for words and if there were suitable words, he certainly didn't know the English translation for them. He did think of one thing to say but it was completely inappropriate.

'So, what happens if you have an itch?'

'I didn't think you'd take me seriously. I suppose you want proof.'

She hadn't really thought this part through. She had been designed to replicate a human being perfectly and indistinguishable and that meant no little panels to unhinge or parts to unplug.

'Maybe this will convince you?'

A quick twiddle of her mole and two of her fingers immediately hinged open and fired two thin wires across the room into an oil painting on the far wall.

'Bloody hell!' Mikael shrieked.

She recoiled the wires back into her fingers and then she fiddled with her mole again. A hypodermic needle protruded, menacingly out of her index finger.

'I can program it to be loaded with anything from antidotes and antibiotics to deadly poisons.

'Good God, so you *are* a British agent then!'

‘Told you.’

‘How awful for you, how did you lose your arm?’

‘I didn’t lose my arm, I lost my whole body!’

‘Oh right, seriously though?’

‘For God’s sake, I am serious. My arms, my legs, my head, all metal and plastic! I am a machine!’

Madeline was becoming visibly frustrated. However, she knew of one way to surely convince him. It was something she had discovered earlier, but could he handle it?

‘You really want proof?

‘Well, yes… whatever you’ve got.’

‘You asked for it! Explain this then?’

Madeline stood up, tightened up the belt on her dressing gown and gracefully lowered herself into the splits position on the carpet. This was very easy for an android.

‘Hmm, yes, very neat, but I think you’ll find you’re not the only one in the world who can do the splits.’

Mikael discretely loosened his collar, his animal urges were returning.

‘Hang on, I haven’t finished yet!’

Effortlessly, she grabbed hold of her leg behind her and pulled it up until it was vertical and flat against her back. Then, in a continuous motion, she brought her other leg up in front of her until both legs were fully upright with feet touching above her head.

‘There! I think you’ll find humans can’t do this.’

‘Fucking hell! Does that hurt?’

‘No, not in the slightest, I’m an android,’ she said curtly, ‘or if you want to be precise, an automaton.’

‘Amazing, never seen anyone do that before. Your government must put you through one hell of a training regime.’

Steam was visibly rising from the gap between his neck and his shirt collar. It didn’t particularly help matters that the oversized dressing gown was now completely failing to cover up critical parts of Madeline’s enticing figure. As one of her breasts was now enticingly on show, she thought it was a good opportunity to demonstrate another of her features. She wiggled her mole and her boob inflated to an impossible size.

Android or not, she was, by all accounts, an extremely erotic and surreal sight. The dressing gown was now almost redundant, barely covering any of Madeline's fleshy bits. Her legs were both vertical with both feet still hovering above her head, and her left breast was three times the size of her right breast. Although Mikael was completely bewildered, shocked and evidently aroused, he remained discrete, averting his eyes as much as possibly could. Madeline was largely indifferent to the effect she was having on him, but all the same, noticed his bright red complexion. Poppy would never have exposed her body so cheaply but Madeline was an android. Disregard for dignity came with the overall package.

'Come on then explain how I can do all this?'

'Extremely double jointed and you've got breast implants, I suppose.'

'Huh, I may as well give up!' said Madeline.

Never, in all her life, had she met someone so sceptical, so likeable but so irritating. Just as Madeline was about to lower her legs, Mikael happened to glance at her feet hovering above her head. He noticed a fine line circumnavigating her big toe.

'Hang on, mind if a take a look?'

'Be my guest. Perfect feet, you'll find.'

'No doubt they are, highly unusual big toe though.'

Mikael rotated the end of her toe.

'What are you doing?' asked Madeline, not being able to see, in her present position.

'You've got a USB port in your toe!'

'You're kidding!'

This was a feature Madeline was completely unaware of.

'All you needed to do was show me your big toe. That would have been convincing enough. You just wanted to raise my blood pressure.'

'Perhaps I did, just a little.'

Madeline lowered her legs to the floor and gathered herself into a normal human position. Then she deflated her breast back to normal. Perhaps a little too late, she arranged the dressing gown to restore her dignity. Mikael had to sit back in his chair and let everything sink in. In the last couple of minutes, his perception of Madeline had transformed from being a seductive minx of a reporter to a double-jointed British agent automaton. It was an awful lot to take in!

‘Hang on, you ate my spag bol and drank the cocoa.’

‘I know. I didn’t want to seem ungrateful. Now I’ve got to figure out a way of getting rid of it!’

‘So, what *does* an android feed on?’

‘Cooking oil,’

‘Cooking oil?’

‘Yes, delicious cooking oil. I’d rather we didn’t talk about it. It makes me heave!’

‘Okay, tell me about your real body then?’

‘This is my real body now!’ snapped Madeline.

This was a good sign. She had accepted her new self for what it was and was defensive of this fact.

‘Sorry, yes, I know it is, I mean the body that was burnt. Where is it?’

‘In England somewhere.’

Madeline was dismissive, but she knew exactly where her real body was. She wasn’t that affiliated with her new body to forget something as important as where her real home was.

A new concern for Madeline was that of being constantly in a goldfish bowl. Almost certainly, everything she did, say, hear or see, was being monitored. She had absolutely no privacy or moment to herself. To some extent, she had become indifferent to this concept and accepted it as part of being Madeline Bull. Occasionally, though, she yearned for a little privacy. There was, however, one place where no one could listen in and that was her thoughts. It was probably at this singular moment in time when the full magnitude of being listened into and watched over, hit hard. Whoever it was, almost certainly Turner, he was like a conscience – an android conscience. Perhaps no one was monitoring her, perhaps they’d got bored of doing so, but that was wishful thinking. If only Turner had access to her system, surely, he couldn’t be watching her all the time. The upshot of all this was that if she decided to take Mikael to bed, purely for experimental reasons, of course, she didn’t give a monkey’s.

Then again, a method of communicating, without the world knowing about it, would be useful. She would immediately put some thought into it.

‘Mikael, could I have a pen and a piece of paper?’

She closed her eyes and wrote on the paper *“Would u like 2 take an*

Android 2 bed?" and then promptly vomited a load of chocolat-y tomato-y mush all over Mikael's cream hearth rug.

18. Killing a monster

As near as dammit, she was perfect. She felt everything and everything was in the right place.

Mikael was a little apprehensive about having his leg over with a machine but this small incidental fact was by no means a turn-off. For some reason, Madeline was built to replicate a woman down to the finest most intimate detail. She was a little concerned about the smell of cooking oil on her breath, but the regurgitated onions from the spaghetti bolognese completely masked out any whiff of oilseed rape. It was only right and courteous that, throughout it all, she thanked the four scientists: Mike Spencer, Rob Hogarth, Justine Constable and Chris Reynolds for what they had done for her. She never really got to know the extra two surgeons but she thanked them as well. They were all extraordinarily clever people. Eventually, when Madeline was fully satisfied in every way possible, she allowed Mikael to nod off and then she followed suit.

Often is the case, the last thing on your mind before you go to sleep, forms the overall framework of your dream. Madeline's dream followed this notion. She dreamt that she became pregnant – as you do. The gestation lasted five minutes and then she gave birth to a handsome baby boy. The child was bionic in every sense of the word, half-machine and half-human. In five hours, the child had grown into a fully mature man-machine. This man, Madeline's son, had a purpose. He had to travel back in time to the year 2010 and warn everybody not to buy a 3D television. It was just a fad and would never catch on. Up until this point, the dream had followed pretty much your standard Freudian psychoanalytical mechanisms but after this point, the dream started to become really silly – fortunately, it was morning.

Madeline woke up to find herself being held tightly in Mikael's arms. She could have drawn the wrong conclusion from this intimacy but immediately realised that he was clinging onto her to stop himself from falling off his… quarter of the bed. There was no denying it, they had slept together, shared a dressing gown with each other and were now very good friends. However, it could never be any more than that. Madeline would always have Adam and Mikael would always have Maria.

Breakfast was a relaxed affair. The choice on offer was a bowl of cornflakes and a cup of coffee… or a pint of cooking oil. Madeline opted for the cooking oil. They had an awful lot to talk about.

'So, who are Mike and Rob then?' asked Mikael as he shovelled the cornflakes into his mouth.

'Sorry, you weren't supposed to hear that.'

'No problem, you were barely whispering. Pity I can't say the same about your snoring!'

'You're joking, I snore! Sorry about that, I really am lifelike.'

'I have to admit, it *was* the sexiest snore I've ever heard. I'm still trying to get my head around all this. You are truly remarkable you know.'

'Yes, I suppose I am but I can't claim any credit, it's all down to the four scientists who built me: Mike Spencer, Rob Hogarth, Justine Constable and Chris. I owe everything to them.'

'Hang on… Spencer, Hogarth, Constable, Reynolds! I'm no expert on British culture but aren't they all artists?' Mikael pointed to his now ruined picture *(caused by Madeline's taser weapon)* of Constable's "Haywain" hanging on his wall.

'Sorry about that. It's not an original, is it?'

'Yes, it cost me five dollars!'

'Come to think about it, I've got a Hogarth *original*, "Southwick fair" at home. Cost me twelve pounds.'

Then she realised that she hadn't got that lovely home anymore. She wondered who was living there now.

'I'll tell you something else,' said Mikael eagerly, interrupting Madeline's thoughts, 'Turner's another British artist!'

They smiled at each other across the breakfast table partly because of this new revelation and partly because of the night before.

'So, what would you like to do today?' asked Mikael and then answered his own question. 'We could go to Victory Square and have a coffee and a bun? Sorry, forget that. We could have a nice walk around the lake? I know, we could go and visit the motorcycle factory?'

'Or we could go and slay a monster?' suggested Madeline.

It was time she put Mikael back on track and remind him why she was there.

‘Yeah, let’s go and slay a monster!’ said Mikael enthusiastically. Then he asked an important question. ‘So, just how do you intend to kill this monster?’

‘Oh, I thought I’d use my index finger for a change.’

Madeline wiggled her mole to remind Mikael just how easily her index finger transformed into a syringe.

‘Unfortunately, it’s not quite that simple. There’s something important that you should know. A few days ago, much of the world’s governments found out about De Par’s new threat – his little hidden packages. Apparently, he’s had them strategically placed all over the world. ‘Par’s parcels’ they’ve nicknamed them. Once a day, they get a signal to ‘*stay safe’*. If they don’t get this signal, they are all programmed to open up and release a deadly virus into the air. If you kill De Par, the consequences are that you will also inadvertently kill billions of people all over the world. It’s his insurance, if you like, to stay alive and to have ultimate control.’

‘Over everyone. I see, I never said it was going to be easy!’ said Madeline calmly. ‘I think it’s a bloody good job we met, don’t you? So, all we have to do is find out where these little packages are, destroy them and then I can kill De Par?’

‘You certainly have a gift for oversimplifying matters. It’s an unquantifiable problem. No one knows how many devices there are or what they look like or what viruses they contain. All anyone knows is that the release of just one virus from one single parcel, could, with the right conditions and wind direction, kill millions of people.’

There was a moment or two of silence while they both thought about the consequences of a world without people. A thought crossed Mikael’s mind, would Madeline, being non-biological, be the sole survivor? A different thought crossed Madeline’s mind. Would the virus get into her tank? With those thoughts and several others out of the way, she continued.

‘My Dad, he’s passed away now but you would have liked him. Once, he told me that even the most complicated things in the world can always be broken down into simple little chunks. So, let’s start with a little chunk!’

Madeline was quite proud of her profound little tale especially as it introduced Mikael to her longtime dead father. This gave her encouragement to continue.

‘This daily signal, how does he send it? By telephone, internet, radio, mobile?’ asked Madeline.

‘No one knows for sure. Obviously, it can’t be by phone or mobile because I would imagine someone would have traced the calls by now and located where the devices are. Could be the internet I suppose but then again, the I.P. addresses could be traced. It won’t be by radio unless he uses shortwave and that would be very unreliable. Somehow though, he’s communicating with the packages.’ said Mikael.

‘So how the hell is he doing it?’ Madeline pondered.

‘It’s baffled the best brains,’ said Mikael.

Madeline’s artificial spine suddenly shivered. Was a former scatter-brained news correspondent on this occasion, brighter than the brightest?

‘Apparently, I can go anywhere in the world, you know, and still keep in perfect communication with my body in England.’

'That’s satellite technology for you,’ declared Mikael.

‘I don’t use satellites.’

‘You must do… Hang on though, your responses aren’t delayed. Say hello.’

‘Hello.’ Her response was instant.

‘How are you doing that, communicating with your body with no delays?’

‘The same way De Par is, with his packages.’

‘How can you know that?’

‘Look, last night I collapsed on your bedroom floor because I lost signal. The same thing happened when I was in Africa the day before.’

‘Were you almost naked then, too?’

‘No, a lot worse, I was driving. The night before that I also lost signal. But the thing is, every time it happens it’s around the same time.’

‘Yes, so?’

‘Don’t you see? Around half past seven, each evening, some kind of interference is putting me out of action. It lasts for about forty seconds.’

‘Sorry you’ve lost me, why should the system your android body uses, be anything to do with De Par?’

‘My body uses a radio system invented by Professor Braw… gen or something. This clever person invented a way of making radio waves go through solid matter without hindrance.’

‘That explains it, line-of-sight, no matter where you are.’ said Mikael.

‘Yes, exactly. All I know is, it’s very clever. As you’ve gathered, there are no delays like you’d get from satellite communication and I’m not affected by bad weather.’

‘Amazingly clever. I still don’t see why it’s got anything to do with De Par though?’

‘This radio system has a downside, it’s sort of mutually exclusive. It works on just one particular frequency.’

‘Therefore, it can only have one user at a time! De Par is sending his signal every evening at 7:30 and he’s interfering with you!’ cheered Mikael.

‘Exactly! He’s interfering with my bodily functions. Just before my connection breaks down, I hear a noise, just for a split second – a buzzing noise.’

‘A data stream. That has to be the signal he’s sending to the devices.’ said Mikael then he suddenly changed into a more sombre tone. ‘There is something very worrying about this, if he’s interfering with you, you are possibly interfering with him.’

‘What a horrible thought! I better get cracking then and get the job done,’ said Madeline.

Madeline didn’t like the ‘interfering with bodily function’ bit at all. She knew it was purely about radio signals, but when you depend on them to control everything you do, it was completely distasteful.

‘What do you mean, I? We, surely?’ insisted Mikael.

‘Look, admit it, I’m slightly more resilient than you are. Don’t forget, even if this body gets destroyed, I’m still alive. Not much of a life I know, but still technically alive. You, on the other hand, stand an excellent chance of getting killed.’

‘Forget it, you’re not doing it alone, I owe De Par a return visit. I’ve been waiting for this moment ever since I first arrived in this country and I’m not going to sit back and miss all the action!’

Mikael was clearly steadfast. His mind was made up. Madeline wisely relented for the time being.

19. Headmaster's study

Realistically, Mikael never thought that there would be an opportunity for retribution. However, thanks to meeting this incredible machine with an impetuous life force inside it, revenge was a fast train stopping at his station – time for Mikael to get prepared. It was at this stage in Madeline's new career that she realised that she had become moderately professional in her approach to her work. For instance, she didn't wear camouflaged clothes, equip herself with a compass or walkie-talkies or Kendall Mint cake or an unbreakable thermos flask filled with black coffee, but Mikael did.

They set off, westerly, in Mikael's somewhat battered, sage green VW campervan. It was only a relatively short journey to De Par's laboratories but the tired campervan seemed to take forever. Mikael had a completely misplaced sense of adventure, shaking gently with trepidation and excitement. Madeline had no reason to be afraid, but she was concerned for her new friend. Her real body was out of harm's way and her mechanical body was impervious to most things. However, Mikael could well be walking into the mouth of a crocodile with only sweet black coffee to ward off the fangs.

Their plan was neither simple nor complicated mainly because they didn't have a plan, but as usual, that was a mere detail. They both decided that a good place to start would be to get into De Par's laboratory. They had absolutely no reason why they thought this course of action was either beneficial or wise, but they had to start somewhere.

There was only one way to get into De Par's lab – through the main gate. However, the entrance was heavily guarded, not by members of De Par's staff, but by fully armed state police. This took Madeline by surprise but Mikael explained that it was in the world's interest that De Par was protected by government services. The consequences of a do-gooder assassin would inadvertently end up with billions dead through Par's parcels. This was highly irritating to the already stretched Belarusian police force but at least the police were happy with the fact that they were doing an important job.

'We could go in as reporters; that's what we're almost certainly best at,' said Madeline as two police guards approached the opened side

window of the van.

‘We’ve come to do an article on Professor De Par,’ explained Madeline, hoping at least one of the Policemen was fairly fluent in English.

‘You have an appointment?’ asked one of them.

‘You’re kidding, right? Go in that place without one, more than my life’s worth. Upsetting De Par is the last thing we want to do.’

Both policemen appeared to understand every word Madeline said and courteously allowed them through the gates.

‘There, that wasn’t too difficult, was it?’

Madeline turned to Mikael with a devious smile.

‘What the hell! You didn’t?’ said Mikael with a mixture of shock and amusement.

Madeline’s breasts were almost too inflated to be contained within her tight scanty top. This sight was obviously enough to convince the policemen that Madeline, Mikael and the van posed no threat whatsoever and should be allowed in. Mikael had one eye on where he was driving and the other on Madeline’s breasts as they slowly deflated to a manageable size.

‘You’d never know I had a couple of bullet holes in one of them a few days ago, would you?’ she prided herself. ‘Inflate quite nicely now, don’t you think?’

‘Er, yes… they do,’ stuttered Mikael.

Avoiding armed Police while trying to comment on Madeline’s breasts was proving a challenge.

‘Shit, you should have stayed pumped up, there’s another cop over there,’ shrieked Mikael pointing towards the entrance of the building.

‘Not to worry, I’ll use another tactic,’ said Madeline calmly.

Mikael drove close as he could to the building entrance.

‘Sunday Times!’ shouted Madeline confidently, through the small van window. ‘We’ve come to interview De Par. Where shall we leave the vehicle?’

Madeline had learnt during her years as a correspondent that the best way to get results, no matter how bleak and impossible the situation appears, is to be barefaced and act with completely focused confidence. If there were any questions to be asked, make sure that you’re always the one asking them.

‘Pardon madam?’

‘Where… shall… we… leave… the… vehicle?’ said Madeline forcefully.

The policeman waved his arm and pointed his hand in such a way as to translate into “turn left and left again”.

‘Thanks.’ replied Madeline.

Her confident, barefaced manner had done the trick, this time, without the aid of inflated parts of her anatomy.

They were now in an ideal situation, parked up in a quiet little car park at the back of the Laboratory building. Madeline knew exactly what she’d got to do, Mikael hadn’t a clue. She did a frantic bit of mole wiggling and then farted.

‘Sorry Sugar, this is something I have to do on my own.’

Mikael had just enough time utter, ‘What on Earth…’

He was completely unprepared for what Madeline had unleashed. If he’d had a moment to think, he would have realised that androids don’t have flatulence, but he didn’t. Within a couple of seconds, he was out cold.

It was clear that Madeline had become very fond of Mikael. Certainly not in love with or infatuated with, but she found him a lovely man who she had enjoyed sharing his bed with and doing several other nice things with. Madeline had done a risk assessment and concluded that he could well die and she most likely wouldn’t. She had no choice but to do this alone. Retribution can provide a good reason to kill someone but Mikael would almost certainly create problems with his eagerness. Once more she said sorry, kissed him gently on the cheek, sat him upright, placed a newspaper in his hands and climbed out of the vehicle.

It was now necessary for her to arrange her clothes seductively by undoing a few buttons here and there. She slightly enlarged her breasts and combed her hair with her fingers. The only way in appeared to be through the guarded front entrance. The guard on the door decided to do his job properly on this occasion and thoroughly frisk Madeline for any possible weapons. Naturally, he didn’t find any but predictably he was forced to assume a crouching position well before he reached her ankles. He hurriedly let her pass and then deserted his post for a short while.

Entering the building, Madeline immediately realised that it was an old infant school. Turquoise painted interior walls and herringbone-

patterned maple wood floors brought a torrent of childhood memories to the surface. It was only twenty or so years ago but then she was young, joyful and innocent, now she was none of those things. Being an android was something they never prepared her for. She should have realised that it was an old school building when they drove in through the iron school gates, past the basketball court and into the staff car parking area, but she didn't. The first two classrooms on either side of the corridor were empty but still showing evidence of young children's creative artwork, blu-tacked to the walls. One of the end classrooms, a science classroom, was occupied by a hand full of men and women wearing white lab coats. They were working away with test tubes, pipettes and other stuff you find in expensive chemistry sets. She barged in expecting some kind of confrontation but they were far too busy to take their eyes off their important work. Madeline tapped a man on the shoulder,

'What's this then? A new minty mouthwash?' she asked brazenly.

He didn't reply, the only reaction she got from him was a glance at the CCTV camera in the corner of the room. It was at this point that she noticed that they all wore a device on one of their wrists. Clearly, it was not an item they wished to wear. The complex-looking device housed a tiny glass file filled with a menacing-looking green liquid. It didn't take much of a guess to realise its purpose.

She quietly left the classroom and continued to walk along several identical corridors. No other rooms appeared to be used apart from one, right at the end of the final corridor – the headmaster's study. She courteously knocked on the door marked "Head Teacher"; this was a force of habit and brought back vivid memories. This time, however, she didn't wait for a reply and barged into the room.

'Well, hello, what a pleasant surprise. How nice to see a new face and such a pretty one at that. Madeline Bull, isn't it? I've heard all about you… And you've brought along one of my previous acquaintances, Mr Ottis. A shame he hasn't come in with you. Never mind, completely understandable. Now then, what can I do for you?' asked a very talkative Raymond De Par with disingenuous pleasantness.

He was indeed a monster in every way imaginable. A sinister, Hitler-moustached, thin-featured man with piercing eyes that never seemed to close or even blink. Madeline shuddered despite her invulnerability. He sat at his oak desk assuming the manners of a public-school headmaster. Cosy and cramped as headmaster's studies usually are, this was not. The room had been stripped completely of its old occupation and now the bare walls and bricked-up fireplace gave the room a chilling feel. A monitor occupied a good portion of his desk

and to the left of this was a small box containing a neat row of switches with a name next to each switch. Madeline assumed they were the names of the scientists she had met moments ago. She looked around the room before joining in with his conversation.

‘You know who I am, then?’

‘Word travels fast through the brotherhood.’

‘Wardate?’ suggested Madeline, casually.

‘As they say, your reputation precedes you. I knew they’d send somebody eventually. They must have great confidence in you.’

‘I just do my job,’ said Madeline casually.

‘Everyone else treads carefully. Complaisant arse creepers. They call me sir and tremble as they talk to me, goodness knows why. You, on the other hand, are very refreshing. So, what is it Madeline Bull, mysterious British secret agent, are you brave or foolish? Please, sit down.’

Madeline did as she was told, after all, she was in the headmaster's study. All that was separating Madeline and De Par was a large oak desk. It wouldn’t be long now. De Par sat relaxed on his leather-bound swivel chair. Madeline sat upright on a plastic moulded, tubular framed chair.

‘I’m intrigued, so, how are you going to do this?’

‘Do what?’

‘You know, kill me without a weapon and still manage to save the human race?’ asked De Par in a patient manner.

‘Oh, I’ll think of something, first though, I always like to ask my targets a few questions, it helps me get into the mood.’

‘Fire away…’

‘Not yet… So why do you do it? You know, terrorise the whole world with your viruses?’

‘I *help* people,’ he insisted insincerely. He then continued with a calm and patronising tone. ‘I have developed cures for many deadly viruses.’

‘Bullshit! You develop new deadly viruses and extort the world in exchange for your antidotes. Anyway, I have no time for this, you *are* an evil man, you are a Resident of Wardate and I’ve come here to kill you.’

De Par was certainly impressed with the eagerness and gall of this

very attractive woman from England, but it made no difference to his attitude.

'Oh, I'm trembling, are you going to kill me with your bare hands?'

De Par laughed heartily but all of a sudden, his sniggering stopped and he transformed into something far more fearsome and inhuman.

'It was a messy business, your friend Mr Ottis and his girlfriend. After that, I had my team come up with something a little tidier, something more effective – more to hand.'

He quickly opened the desk drawer and produced an unusual looking stainless-steel pistol. On impulse, Madeline's pushed the oak desk violently into him, trapping him uncomfortably against the wall. She had no idea why she reacted this way as a bullet would cause relatively little harm, just put another ugly hole in her beautiful flesh. Unfortunately, being pinned against the wall was not enough to stop him from firing his special gun straight into Madeline's face. What came out of the gun was not the expected bang with a lump of lead hurtling towards her at twice the speed of sound, but a warm, colourless liquid.

'Well, you'd better hurry up and kill me. I estimate you have about… forty seconds left to live,' De Par calmly informed Madeline.

'What was that then, some household detergent?' suggested Madeline, coolly.

'I suppose you have the right to know as it is about to end your life. It's a live culture held in suspension. The gun is, as you can see, little more than a water pistol incorporating a miniature incubation tank – a cute little invention of mine.'

'I assume your scientists are wearing something along similar lines on their wrists. At a guess I would say those switches in front of you, trigger them, right? Anyway, continue. What exactly is the live culture that's going to kill me?'

'Well, I must admit I'm impressed with your curiosity, considering you're about to die. It's not exactly a poison as you might think. It's a cunning little germ, a close relative of the virus that caused the English sleeping sickness back in the fifteenth century. It took me months to develop it,' said De Par informatively.

'I think you'll find that I've had the jabs, plenty of visits to foreign countries to thank for that,' said Madeline.

'You won't be immune to this one! What's amazing is how fast it takes hold. Once my little germ enters your eyes or nose it takes effect

within seconds, closing down your nervous system completely, and then you're as good as dead.'

'Thank you for the lecture. So, I assume you must be immune to this particular virus then?'

'Yes, needless to say, it was a challenge to find the antidote. Unfortunately, there were a few casualties before we got there. Anyway, you should be dead,' he looked at his watch… any second now,' said De Par, cheerfully.

Despite the desk trapping limiting his movement, De Par's hands were sufficiently free enough to be able to watch the second hand of his very expensive Omega watch as it approached the thirty-five-second mark.

'…Thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty, forty-one, forty-two,' Madeline speeded up the count. 'What a shame, it looks like I *am* immune to your little speedy virus.'

Before forty-five had arrived and gone, Madeline had fired her trusty old Taser weapon into De Par's chest. Each time she tapped on her cute little mole, a surge of high voltage passed painfully into De Par's body. This was something he most definitely wasn't immune to.

'Okay you piece of sputum, where's the transmitter?' said Madeline aggressively.

De Par was clearly experiencing excruciating bursts of pain but he was nothing if not stubborn.

'I will end… the human race… for this… This will be… your legacy.'

Madeline boosted the voltage flowing down the Taser wires, to maximum. On reflection, this was probably a mistake. If he did want to talk, he was now completely incapable of doing so. No one could ever accuse Madeline of not being patient but this time she had heard and seen enough. It was time for her to administer a little of Madeline's own medicine. She gave him one final long merciless burst of electric current and then recoiled the Taser wires. A few more manipulations of her mole followed and then she thrust her finger with the needle protruding, into his arm.

'See if you're immune to this you evil bastard. A little concoction of *my* own!' Madeline really could be a nasty piece of work when she had to be.

Without the flow of electricity into De Par's body, he managed to ask one last question before Madeline's poison ended his life,

'What, the hell are you?'

‘That’s something you will never know!’

20. The inconsistency

Raymond De Par, one of the most utterly evil men to ever live, was now slumped across his beautifully carved oak desk, motionless and completely dead. This part was good but once again Madeline had been impetuous. This time, far too impetuous as now, De Par's wrath would certainly be unleashed upon the world. Madeline knew it wasn't a good time to speculate, there was only one way forward now and that was to find his particular Braugenhau transmitter. She searched the desk drawers and his pockets and found nothing more than a bunch of keys. Even though she had silicone skin, being this close to him and touching him made her desperately want to wash the evilness off her hands. She gave him one last glance before she left the room. She had effortlessly killed another monster. This could become habit-forming.

Racing down the corridor, she passed the classroom occupied by the scientists, she doubled back. There was an unusual looking key on the bunch she'd taken out of dead De Par's pocket. She had a good idea what it was for so she separated it from the rest. She told the scientists the newsflash and threw the unusual key indiscriminately toward them.

'Here's the key to your wrist devices. De Par is dead, time to go home!'

She hadn't time to hang around to witness their indescribable joy of being free and very much alive – even though the *alive* bit could well be a temporary thing. However, at least everyone could rest assured that Madeline was *somehow,* going to do her very best to save the world.

She gently shook Mikael from his slumber. It would have been an understatement to say that he was annoyed. Madeline expected him to be angry but she knew it would pass in the fullness of time.

'De Par is dead, we have to find the transmitter,' said Madeline in a panic.

Mikael calmed down surprisingly quickly. He knew there was no point in bawling at an android even if *it* did contain an excessive amount of human traits.

He spoke to her calmly, ‘why did you do that, I thought the whole point, Turner getting us together and all that, was so that we could work together?’

‘We did work together but you would certainly be dead now if you’d gone in with me. He knew you were with me. He must have seen us arrive on his monitor. He would have loved to have had another go at killing you.’

‘Now I’ll never have revenge for Maria’s death.’

‘Listen, how were you going to kill him? A punch on the nose, a whack on the head with your thermos flask? He was ready! I would have been dead now if I was human. Accept it, he’s dead!’

Mikael doused his anger with a few rational thoughts.

‘OK, I’m angry, what do you expect? I suppose I owe you my life but that may not be for long!’

‘Don’t overdo the thanks, will you! Come on, let’s search the building for the transmitter.’

On the way back into the building, Madeline decided to keep a low profile and not say anything to the guard just in case she was arrested for murder. That would have been irritating and inconvenient. However, the scientists running out of the building, whooping and cheering, should have given the guard some kind of indication that something significant had happened inside.

Madeline and Mikael tore through the building looking for something that resembled a transmitter. The gym, the kitchen and canteen were all empty, and so were the toilets and changing rooms.

‘The boiler room!’ said both of them in unison.

They found a door which opened onto a stairway, the steps descended into darkness. At roughly the same moment that Mikael found a light switch, a putrid odour reached his nostrils. Only Mikael could smell the rotting flesh so only Mikael had the misfortune of anticipating what was lurking below. There was no sign of the Braugenhau transmitter but there were nine dead bodies all in various states of decay. On the plus side, they were all neatly lined up on the far side of the room. Six were wearing white lab coats – obviously, scientists who didn’t toe the line and three civilians – two men and one woman, presumably visitors. Most were covered in boils and blisters except for one scientist whose skin was a striking shade of bottle green. Mikael hastily put a tissue across his nose and mouth in case of infection, Madeline followed suit even though it was unnecessary. They quickly came to the same conclusion that the transmitter was not in the

building. Aware that time was of the essence, they raced up the stairs, down the corridor and through the main door.

Mikael briefly stopped to speak to a policeman at the entrance, 'You might want to notify the authorities. The whole place needs to be fumigated and placed in quarantine but not necessarily in that order. Oh, and by the way, De Par is dead.'

The policeman likewise, didn't know in which order to do things, apprehend Mikael, get on his radio or run like hell. He was human, after all, so he ran like hell.

Once again, they were in a friendly place, Mikael's VW campervan. They drove straight past both policemen standing outside the school gates. They were busily chattering on their mobile phones. A few hundred yards further down the road they passed the scientists. Mikael sounded his horn – they waved and whistled.

'Alright, where to now? The human race is most probably about to expire. You've lit the blue touch paper to the most effective weapon of mass destruction ever, not to be found, and we can't find this special transmitter,' panicked Mikael.

'Mikael, calm down! The interference I told you about, happens at about seven-thirty every evening. We have a few hours yet,' said Madeline, then she had a thought. 'Seven-thirty, wouldn't De Par be at home then?'

'I would think so. That's where the transmitter will be then, I'll put money on it!' cheered Mikael.

'So, where the hell does he live?'

'Finally, I have my usefulness,' said Mikael smugly.

This was just one of many things Mikael had taken the trouble to find out, although it wasn't exactly a secret. Some said he changed his car three times on the way home to shake off anyone who was following him but that was just conjecture. To do that would have been pointless because his house was openly under constant police surveillance. It was thought prudent that De Par was protected from any would-be assassins at home and at work. Powers that be, knew that he was far more dangerous to the human race, dead than alive.

Thanks to Madeline he was now dead, and now, very dangerous!

His house happened to be about four miles from his laboratory, therefore, after about fifteen minutes of high-speed campervan driving, they finally arrived. The *dead* evil man's place of residence was nothing special: a modest detached house with a reasonably sized

jungle for a garden. Across the road from his house, prominently parked, was a highly visible police car containing one slumbering police officer. It was a shame to wake him.

'How the hell are we going to break in without alerting the whole neighbourhood, and that copper?' asked Mikael, he then thought for a moment. 'It looks like the bathroom window is on the catch. I could find something to climb on, lift the catch and get in through the window?'

'Yes, you could… or we could use the front door!'

Madeline produced De Par's bunch of keys from her pocket.

'That was my next suggestion!' Mikael lied.

He kept a tidy home, functional, uncluttered and unwelcoming. Clearly, his life was strictly dedicated to his evil work to the exclusion of everything else. No sign of female company, no family photos and no modern technology, not even a television. There was an antiquated radiogram in the lounge and a collection of vinyl records next to it but that was it, not even a Wi-Fi connection. Several stuffed animal heads hung about the walls and an assortment of shooting trophies, surprisingly dust-free, were arranged neatly on the mantlepiece. A Remington twelve-bore shotgun propped up against the fireplace, completed the hunting theme. The kitchen looked neglected. Only the toaster and a butter knife seemed to have had any use. All this evidence pointed to the fact that he *was* highly eccentric, very lonely and more than likely, completely mad.

After ten minutes of independent searching, they both conceded that the transmitter was not in the house.

'Where the bloody hell is it then?' Mikael groaned.

'Seven-thirty, *would* he be at home then or on his way home?' asked Madeline, it was an obvious question.

Instinctively, they both shouted out, 'HIS CAR!' in unison.

Again, the campervan was driven like the wind only this time in the opposite direction. Driving the campervan in this reckless manner naturally took its toll on the tired engine resulting in it leaving a cloud of thick blue smoke in its wake.

The old school, De Par's laboratory, was now bustling with countless police and ambulance staff all wearing breathing masks. The decayed bodies were carefully being carried out on stretchers by people in white airtight suits. Expectedly, there was a mixed frenzy of panic, disbelief and embarrassment. De Par was dead, yes, really, he was!

Killed by a young slip of a woman. The remaining scientists fortunate enough to be still alive, were now safe and freed from their nightmare imprisonment. All this had happened brazenly under the very noses of the country's most elite, most experienced security police.

Obviously, Madeline and Mikael couldn't use the main entrance again mainly because they were now the most wanted people in Belarus, and perhaps, the world. They, Madeline to be precise, through her overzealous actions, had now put the entire world in critical danger and embarrassed the Belarusian police force in the process. Consequently, they had to find another way in. As it happened, this was easy. All they had to do was negotiate some iron railings at the back of the school and then they had unobstructed access to the car park. Despite the commotion at the front of the building, the car park, formerly the school playground, was quiet and completely deserted. There were several cars in the car park, hopefully, one of them was De Par's. The rest were probably owned by the unfortunate corpses that had been rotting away in the basement. Mikael immediately thought of how to identify De Par's car.

'We just have to find the car with the cleanest windscreen!' he said smugly.

'Or I could just press the button on his car key,' said Madeline.

She pressed the unlock button and a sleek black Mercedes silently blinked its orange indicator lights three times.

Within minutes, Mikael had located the bulky transmitter in the boot of the car. The transmitter was housed in a big heavy metal box connected to the car's wiring loom by means of a dozen or so different coloured wires. This heavy bland metal box and the technology contained within had obviously been acquired by De Par's own style of extortion. Madeline was amazed that something similar although naturally far more sophisticated and aesthetically pleasing was built into her petite android body. All they had to do now was find an extra switch somewhere inside the car. It would have been too much to expect a big red button on the dashboard marked 'Stay Safe' so they didn't expect it. They would have to do it the hard way which meant pressing all the buttons, switches, stalks and levers until Madeline's signal was disrupted, this would be a clear indication that a signal had been sent. After pressing several switches, an important thought crossed Madeline's mind.

'It's not seven-thirty for another five hours. Just a thought, what if the signal has to be sent exactly then, not a minute before?'

Mikael instantly recognised Madeline's logic and promptly stopped

prodding.

‘Well, we can’t wait here for six hours, the police could venture around the corner at any moment. One thing’s for certain, they won’t let us have our say. They’ll just lock us up and forget about us for a few days,’ said Madeline.

‘Then the *“stay safe”* signal won’t be sent and goodbye human race,’ said Mikael pessimistically.

‘Then everyone will die, apart from me,’ Madeline added to the gloom. ‘Only one thing for it, I’ll have to drive the car out.’

‘No, I’ll drive it out! You have to let me contribute something to our adventure,’ pleaded Mikael.

Madeline dearly wanted to drive especially as it was a top-of-the-range Merc, but she had to reluctantly concede. She was fully aware that her style of driving, in this instance, may well be inappropriate and could easily endanger human life. The last thing she wanted to do was to injure Mikael or run over a policeman.

He drove carefully and slowly around the corner of the school building and headed hesitantly towards the gates. It was evident that Mikael wasn’t used to driving strange cars. Dozens of police attempted to stop the car by blocking its path. Regardless, Mikael continued to inch his way towards the exit, running over a policeman’s foot in the process. He winced with consternation but Madeline ensured him that his toes were most likely protected with steel toe caps. This made him feel much better. Finally, the car reached the threshold of the school grounds.

Madeline was forced to say something fairly important, ‘If we’re going to have any chance of losing the police, I think you’ll have to put your foot down just a touch more!’

Mikael did as he was told. Normally, he was more than comfortable with the few horsepowers delivered by the campervan’s engine but this was a Mercedes with the name ‘Brabus’ adorning the boot lid. It was a few seconds before all four wheels stopped burning rubber and by then, the car was already breaking every known speed limit. Mikael childishly screamed at first but then began to appreciate the exhilarating experience. Usually, Mikael considered going too fast an excessive waste of fuel and highly irresponsible, but this was an exception. Madeline was genuinely impressed and after five minutes of frenzied driving, she leaned over and told him that the police were no longer following. She didn’t want to spoil his moment, so she didn’t tell him that the police hadn’t bothered to follow them at all. Clearly, they had much more important things to worry about.

Mikael drove to a remote spot in the countryside, high up on a hillside. It didn't particularly have to be elevated as, according to the specs, the radio system would work from anywhere… to anywhere.

This really was a mind-numbingly, beautiful country. From their vantage point, they could see for miles and miles in every direction. Even though Madeline's ultra-high-definition cameras inside her head were no match for the perception of a human eye, she still appreciated the wonderful lush colours and complex undulating scenery. She thought about how this wonderful world continually contrasts itself: Her present view, so many shades of green to that of a few days ago, the golden pastel shades of Africa and then before that, the homely grey shades of rain-soaked England. De Par's chemical weapons *had* to be deactivated. This planet was far too beautiful not to be inhabited by humans. Animals, birds, fish and insects, if they survived, just wouldn't appreciate it the same. She realised, that despite horrific wars, man's truly evil ways and an ever-increasing dissatisfaction in the world, this countryside, this view, this wonderful world was always ready, waiting for her and everyone else to enjoy – when they found the time. She had never thought profoundly like this before.

When Madeline was Poppy, she had never been one for exploring the countryside. The closest she came to that was a walk around Hyde Park or a stroll along the Thames embankment. She had never been one for watching wildlife programs and absolutely hated anything remotely to do with David Attenborough. She was reasonably self-centred, back stabbingly ambitious and naturally hungered for fame. Her interests had mainly centred around fashion, celebrity gossip and TV soaps. She used to be completely shallow and now she was becoming deeply ashamed of her previous self.

After an appropriate amount of time absorbing the wonderful scenery, three hours still remained to kill. They couldn't risk pressing any more buttons just in case the "*stay safe*" transmission had to be at the precise time so they needed to find something else to pass the time away. Neither of them wanted to make it too obvious what they *could* be doing, so both of them opted for the stand-offish approach. They talked a little, but when you have only one thing on your mind, it's impossible to immerse yourself seriously in any other conversation. It was Mikael's hands that were the first to break the deadlock and misbehave. Madeline's hands spontaneously followed and then suddenly without so much as an apology, their lips came into contact with each other. The misbehaving hands continued to misbehave as they kissed. Mikael had either forgotten that Madeline was an artificial being or he was now used to the fact. Madeline was completely used to her new body and had forgotten nothing but she

definitely liked what her new body felt. Front seats of cars can be restrictive while performing certain tasks, fortunately, they reclined a good way back which helped matters enormously. The fact that it was De Par's car made it strangely, all the more exciting. They were misbehaving in an evil man's car. Madeline thought it would be a good time to undo a few more buttons but for some reason, Mikael had gone all limp – in more areas than one.

At first, Madeline thought he had fallen asleep but the snoring only lasted for a few seconds and then he started shaking uncontrollably. Madeline watched helplessly as his skin turned distinctly pale green. Moments later, he was dead in her arms.

The very least Madeline should have done was to have a good wash after visiting De Par's laboratory. After being sprayed in the face with a deadly sleeping virus she should, in hindsight, have been decontaminated and quarantined for at least a week. Of course, none of these things happened. The virus had no effect on her because she was an artificial being. Because of this non-event, the matter of her face being sprayed with a deadly virus had, with all the mayhem, been completely forgotten. Her artificially warmed skin had incubated the virus, especially in her mouth. She had as good as killed him.

She wanted to scream, cry, swear and go into hysterics, but she did none of these things, what good would it do? She raised her seat to the upright position, did a few buttons up, pulled down her skirt and stared, quietly at the view and beyond. She was oblivious to small droplets of saline solution leaking out of her eyes and running down her artificial cheeks. Turner the pervert! He was watching all this, she thought. The very least he could have done was remind her about the virus. He could have sent her a discrete note telling her to have a wash and brush her teeth. That's all he had to do.

For well over two hours, Madeline fixated herself on the far-reaching views from inside the car. She was fully aware that Mikael was next to her, completely cold, ghostly pale green and very dead, but if she didn't look at him, it was just about tolerable. She knew she had a job to do, a very important job and because she had a very good idea where to look, there was still plenty of time – at least ten minutes. She recalled her reformed thoughts and feeling that occupied the time shortly before she killed Mikael. Unfortunately, those uncharacteristic notions had instantly faded at the very same moment that Mikael's life force had faded. The world remained a beautiful place but Madeline, unfortunately, had a wake-up call, she had rebooted her senses. The world was seriously scarred by certain humans, infesting and disrupting its surface. All the suffering that she had endured over the

last twelve months was because of humans, nothing else, just humans: Evil ones, ruthless ones, greedy ones and psychopathic ones. She was almost relieved that she was not classed as human anymore. What would it be like without people, she thought? Madeline had, after all, the means to put this scenario in place simply by not transmitting the *"stay safe"* signal. She would then just sit back and watch it happen. The extinction of the world's population, brought about by De Par's deadly virus.

After a while, Madeline's anger faded and then she truly hated herself for these antisocial thoughts. For a short time, she had almost joined up, signed the dotted line and got the *Wardate* badge. A certain amount of hate and bitterness and before you know it, evil thoughts are whooshing through your neural network. At least now, Madeline had an insight into the minds of these people she had the job of eliminating.

Now it was time.

There was an anomaly, a glaring inconsistency that she noticed quite a while back. It was a small one but nevertheless one that shouted at her. There was a small compact disc storage holder in the car.

Normally this would have meant absolutely nothing. A CD holder would be something you'd expect to find in most cars but De Par was anything but normal. All De Par had in his house was an old radiogram which only played vinyl records. There was no hi-fi, music centre or computer to be seen, nothing that would even attempt to play a CD. This begged the question, what exactly was in the holder? Madeline had decided to make Turner and perhaps the world, sweat a little and not do anything until the last possible moment. She opened the holder. Inside there were three CD cases with classical music covers. One case was empty, the other two contained blank discs.

Handwritten plainly on one of the discs had the words, **"Disarm and self-destruct all devices"**.

Handwritten on the other had the words, **"All devices activate virus dispersal"**.

She turned on the car CD player and pressed the eject button – out popped the missing disc. Handwritten on this disc was one large letter, **'S'**.

Madeline assumed that when the disc was re-inserted it would automatically start. She waited until the car digital clock changed to 7:30 and then pushed in the disc with **'S'** on it.

The disc ran for exactly forty-five seconds and Madeline was

completely immobilised for exactly the same amount of time. She had saved the world. Predictably, moment's later, a message scrolled across her vision:

'Good work Madeline, deliver the car back to the lab. People will be waiting.'

GOOD, is that all I get!? No *please?* No *thank you!?* The temerity of the man, she thought. There was no playing down this situation, Madeline had in her grasp, the most powerful, most lethal weapon the world had ever encountered. It made nuclear weapons look tame. Turner's response was simply not good enough.

Madeline now had a dilemma. Who, she thought, could possibly be entrusted with such a weapon of this magnitude? Madeline certainly didn't trust Turner; she didn't wholly trust herself. Was there anyone, any nation in the world that could be completely relied upon to destroy the weapon and not be tempted to keep it for themselves?

'Okay!' Madeline said out loud, 'will do.'

But Madeline didn't mean a word of it. She ejected the 'S' disc out of the CD player and innocently placed it into the case with the other two CDs. The next move was risky but she knew what she had to do. Presumably, Turner could close her down in an instant. She had to be quick, no hesitation, she took out the disc marked:

"All devices activate virus dispersal" and pushed it into the player.

This time Madeline was immobilised for a lot longer than forty-five seconds.

21. Twisted logic

De Par was far too evil to be so specific as to put neat, clear hand-written titles on each of the two discs. If the discs were solely for De Par's use, letters such as **'K'** for kill and **'D'** for disarm would have been perfectly adequate, just as **'S'** was written on the 'safe' disc. He intended to be evil to the end and had obviously planned for all eventualities. If things did turn out badly for him as indeed they had done, he would have one last opportunity to punish the world.

Madeline had anticipated De Par's twisted logic and had intuitively put the disc in the player that disarmed and self-destructed the devices.

22. Viral engines

Turner reactivated Madeline after 30 minutes, for most of that time she had nothing else to do but stare at the message:

Connection terminated – Black text on a bright white background.

It was Turner's militaristic way of punishing her. Madeline now knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Turner was a complete bastard. After all, she did get it right. The world was now safe, thank goodness, and that was all there was to it!

As promised, Madeline delivered the car back to the school/lab, where men in sealed airtight suits were primed and waiting. She kissed and said goodbye to Mikael, slumped in the passenger seat and then made a run for it as fast as her android body could muster. Decontamination, android style, did not appeal to her one little bit. She opted instead for a thorough wipe down and a good old gargle with neat Jayes fluid. True she would smell like a public toilet for a few hours but so what, people could think what they liked.

And so, the cleanup and decontamination began. The car, complete with transmitter and the dead body of Mikael Ottis was torched and irradiated. Against many wishes, it was ordered that De Par's body was also burnt and his ashes irradiated. This in itself was a massive disappointment to many fellow scientists who followed and, in some ways, admired De Par's work. They would always regard him as a true genius even if he was nefarious – and perhaps insane.

His work in the field of viral engines and the fact that his body was reputed to be full of them was well documented. The viral engines replaced the need for countless vaccines and antidotes by adapting themselves to fight many diseases and poisons. So effective were these viral engines that it was reputed that De Par was immune to most earth-bound ailments including Aids, rheumatoid arthritis and even the common cold. It was even suggested that he was immune to most forms of cancer. Who knows, one day he may have reformed and decided to help the human race, but no one was prepared to wait.

The forty-seven devices strategically placed around the world revealed themselves in the form of clouds of purple smoke, just a few moments

after Madeline had inserted the correct *"disarm and destruct"* disc. These clouds of purple smoke went by, largely unnoticed. Grey smoke would have perhaps caused concern but purple smoke was just pretty and therefore, didn't cause alarm. The devices were something that the general public would never know about and something that would always be denied.

De Par's lab was completely gutted, fumigated, cleared of dead bodies and then redecorated and turned into a retirement home for elderly scientists. His house was similarly dealt with and sold on the open market. It was the end of Raymond De Par. No funeral, no mourners and no family. The Residents of Wardate were now down by a total of two.

23. A little shopping

After several hours of air travel, many awkward questions and a completely drained spirit, she eventually arrived back at her new home. Madeline had almost forgotten about her sparse but comfortable bijou flat and the fact that it was now in Bristol. This time she convinced herself that she *would* appreciate it, she *would* find it cosy and it *was* all that she ever wanted.

Madeline was determined to have a break from all this evil business. When, inevitably, a message appeared in her vision or a note was delivered through her letterbox, she was going to completely ignore it. The fact of the matter was that her remaining attire was severely shabby and inadequate. To put this right, a substantial amount of clothes shopping had to be done. She said nothing out loud to this effect, but Turner seemed to sense her vibes and left her alone for a while.

By now she was so accustomed to her new body that it took a certain amount of concentration to visualise herself in the tank. She knew that what she saw was not reality but two miniature TV screens in front of her real eyes, but she certainly wasn't conscious of that fact. When she touched something, she wasn't feeling the object against her skin but the result of skin sensors in her android body relaying the information back to her nervous system. When she moved, signals from her own muscles were operating soft hydraulic muscles in the android. Despite all these complex things, Madeline was completely unaware of any of these processes going on. Admittedly, she could inflate her breasts at the wiggle of a mole, fart sleeping gas out of her bottom, tie her limbs into knots and fire high voltage wires out of her fingers, but she accepted these abnormalities as simply the way she was – perfectly normal for an android.

Occasionally, she did have concerns about the condition of her real body. She had no real indication that she still had all her limbs; there was no way of knowing. When she was in hospital, she had overheard talk of amputation, but despite this, she instinctively sensed that all her limbs were still there. She wondered if her terribly burnt skin was rotting away or actually healing up.

As she swigged from a bottle of cooking oil, she wondered if she would ever enjoy the delights of chocolate again.

She did a tour of her cute little flat, it had potential. She decided that a little redecoration with a bit of bold colour was in order. Exactly what, she wasn't sure but she had to put her mark on the place somehow. She appreciated that a new home, a new identity, not to mention her new everlasting body, were things many people would give their right arm for. Yes, despite everything, she was very grateful. She switched on the wall-mounted television hoping that it now had an aerial connected, curiously it had. She scanned the channels until she found a David Attenborough nature documentary, she watched and listened intently. She was surprised to learn that an elephant eats for sixteen hours a day and that it has over 40,000 muscles in its trunk. This was fascinating, why hadn't anything like this interested her before?

She discovered that cooking oil could be quite a nice drink. With a bit of mole wiggling, she discovered a file that controlled her food and drink supply. Currently, it was on default which was water and something called supplement VPM1. VPM1 probably stood for vitamin and protein-enriched mush. No doubt this was perfectly nutritious food for her real body but not ideal for her *real* taste buds. She found a menu where she could alter her drink supply to fruit juice, lemon tea or milk. And then after a bit more mole wiggling, she found an *advanced* tab – she clicked on it. Eureka! Coffee, Gin and tonic and red wine.

Within seconds she was sipping delicious red wine. The strange reality was that while she was sucking wine through a straw, hovering in front of her real mouth in the tank, with her new body, she was sipping cooking oil. It was a disparity that she could live with.

There was no 'advanced' tab for food but there were more appetising choices on offer than Slimfast or Complan or whatever it was that she had endured up to now. She found out that she could indulge in such luxuries as asparagus soup, porridge and fruit smoothies. What more could anyone want?

She convinced herself so much that she was having a lovely evening that she actually thought she was. Her bed was surprisingly comfortable, how could this be possible? The mattress was soft but supporting and the pillow was divine, propping her head by just the right amount.

There was no one next to her. She doubted if there ever would be. She thought of Adam and then she thought of Mikael. Poor dear Mikael,

he must surely have had a family. She wondered if they would ever be told the full truth about his tragic death, *and who was responsible*. He had died a hero, but that fact would probably never be disclosed. With these remorseful thoughts, she fell into a deep sleep.

Bristol was as good as anywhere for a serious bout of clothes shopping. Her flat was conveniently situated with only a short walk into the city so she did what came naturally and rang for a taxi. The only clothes Madeline now possessed were the ones she stood up in. The new outfit she bought from the airport terminal the other day and worn the day she killed De Par were wisely although reluctantly, destroyed. The surviving clothes that she had no choice in wearing were the old faithful top and skirt provided by the scientist Justine Constable. To be fair, they had originally made her look reasonably smart and presentable despite being a tad frumpy. Now, however, the top and skirt were no longer their original colours, more a burnt shade of orangey-brown. They also fashioned an array of melted holes entirely due to the singeing they received from Tara Gogli's unavoidable incineration. To add to this, her top had a couple of holes in it where two bullets collided with her breast and her skirt was further stained with dribbles of cooking oil. She was absolutely ashamed of her shoes too, even though they were still as good as new, but for the want of a good polishing. Yes, she was in a right shabby state, but for a creature as perfect and beautiful as Madeline Bull, she carried it off, it was the present 'Bull' look. The scruffy, singed, and distressed style worked and any top designers she happened to come across took notes. It has to be said, Poppy, as in common with many women, used to possess several wardrobes full of clothes, most of which she never wore. In this respect, Madeline had an awful lot of catching up to do.

It was time that Madeline Bull had an image to match her persona. She decided that a black theme would fit perfectly with her line of work. Black leather boots with four-inch heels were purchased first. Then a daringly short black skirt and a tight black sleeveless top followed. Finally, to complete the outfit, a short cut, studded designer leather jacket. She equipped herself with a modest amount of jewellery which included an exorbitantly expensive Rolex watch and a delicate diamond-encrusted gold necklace, and why not? She deserved it, she *had* just saved the world. Her hair colour was an acceptable dark brown, as it was when she was Poppy. Bright red would have been preferred, but she doubted if she could use hair dye on something that hadn't grown out of a scalp. Her new curly locks, caused by excessive temperatures, were something she could have done without, but she could live with it. For the moment she decided

to limit herself to only two more outfits. She had to pace herself. This was one pleasure no one would take away from her.

It had been an enjoyable shopping day and she hoped that there would be plenty of future opportunities to fill her wardrobes, and use the credit card that Turner had kindly given her.

Seemingly by coincidence but possibly not, the instant her wonderful day of shopping came to an end, the words: *'You have a message'* flashed irritatingly in her left eye view. She had a pretty good idea who the message was from, and its contents: An air ticket to God knows where and someone else to kill, she predicted. She was determined not to open up the message, but eventually, curiosity got the better of her.

"Congratulations on your last mission my Dear. The world is definitely breathing a little easier now De Par has de par… ted. LOL.

As a thank you, I've booked you on a flight to New York. I have also booked you a room at the Mandarin Oriental. Perhaps you will continue your shopping spree there? P.S. your flight leaves in four hours."

'Four hours. Very generous, and LOL? Doubtful if he means *lots of love,*' thought Madeline.

There were now two burning questions: firstly, Turner was being far too nice and secondly, exactly who had she got to assassinate this time?

Perhaps she was being a little unfair on Turner. Maybe his rather aloof manner was the result of years of bawling at raw cadets or he was just behaving professionally – something Madeline wasn't all that good at. She accepted that her methods were largely haphazard and amateurish, but up to now, there was no disputing the fact that somehow, she had been entirely successful. Madeline was fully aware of her tendency to fool around with what should be an extremely serious undertaking, but that was her way and her way was, up until now, completely successful. This was a fact that hadn't gone unnoticed. Was this because she wasn't burdened with any human physical weaknesses or was it because of the mental attitude she had developed through unimaginable suffering? Certainly, it was a lot to do with her appearance.

'Yes, I could do with a holiday,' she assured herself.

Up until this point, airport security, on balance, had been a breeze. New York's JFK airport, however, demanded a new level of stealthness, a level that her system completely failed to accommodate. Whatever the stealth program did previously, it had been very

effective. This time though, it failed disastrously. Although the metal detector she walked through, looked the same as all the others, it gave a completely different response. It reacted with such vigour that it almost appeared to sense the full extent of the weaponry Madeline carried within her. Her slender form, clothed in a figure-hugging black outfit, totally dismissed any possibility that she was carrying weapons of any sort, but this didn't deter the security team. A thorough Frisking revealed nothing untoward apart from a few raised heart rates but the sophisticated hand-held detectors screamed at her, at full volume. She was escorted by a young female officer, into a small empty room with no windows, where she was requested to strip down to her underwear. This presented a serious problem – she wasn't wearing any.

As a reminder, there is a simple, straightforward reason for this: androids do not poo, pee or sweat. Also, android boobs do not need support because they are designed to be permanently pert. And if they happen to be mistreated or go saggy or misshapen, they can always be pumped up again. Another thing, why create extra washing? Why own a drawer full of underwear that doesn't serve any particular purpose?

She explained that she wasn't wearing any underwear to the young female security officer but this fact was completely ignored. Seconds later, she was standing there stark naked, but still interacting wildly with the metal detector. Madeline had a foresight of what was to come and that would be very unfortunate. She tried to tell the young woman that there was no need to put on the latex gloves but she insisted. It was procedure, it was her job and that was that.

A sufficient amount of flatulence was administered mainly due to panic rather than any other reason. Madeline was aware that deploying 'weapon 4' (the fart gas) would achieve very little. After all, there was at least one camera watching over them and there were several security people outside the room, but what else could she do? She weighed up the situation and opted to stay put.

Moments later, three male officers piled into the small room to find Madeline standing there, completely naked. They had either seen or been informed of the young woman officer collapsing and were naturally eager to investigate. Acting casually and ever so slightly coy was decided to be her best defence. She stood there like a naked Barbie doll and as innocent as a daffodil while the men very slowly and reluctantly picked up her clothes and offered them to her.

'She just fainted,' Madeline informed them. 'I didn't think she looked very well. I used to faint a lot, but that was because I wasn't eating properly. I got a bit fanatical with my figure, you know how us girls

are. My friend kept on fainting when she got pregnant. You don't think *she* is, do you?'

'Please Miss, if you could dress yourself and pick up your baggage on your way out.'

Clearly, they were overstepping all kinds of security protocols by letting her go without any further inspection. Their main concerns were now focused on the young security woman lying unconscious on the floor – in particular, who exactly was the father of her unborn child?

She was now in the USA. More by luck than judgement she had managed to get into the country, but goodness knows how she was going to get out. She would worry about that when the time came. Her hotel was absolutely fabulous, far better than her previous experiences. The food, unfortunately, was also fabulous. No one seemed to be curious as to why she would want to have her room stocked up with cooking oil, it was just done. Who were they to question the strange habits of this gorgeous British young lady? This was, after all, the American way. The final bill would reflect all requests, no matter how strange or out of the ordinary. When she was a foreign correspondent (and Poppy), New York never became one of her destinations. Perhaps unfairly, the powers that be had decided unanimously, that dry, dusty, hot places provided the best backdrop to her work.

It was fortunate that she had only bought three outfits in England because now she could justify buying several more in New York.

The huge intimidating city could be a lonely place for any individual, especially unaccompanied, but Madeline was not any individual and certainly not on her own. She never forgot for an instant, that she was constantly watched-over Over time, this had become something both sweet and sour.

As it happened, Madeline was even less alone than she thought. There were far more eyes on her than just Turner's lecherous two. For a country that had Super, Spider, Iron, Bat and Ant Man, a fully functioning, artificially intelligent android was not considered entirely implausible. Recent events in other parts of the world had apparently alerted American intelligence to this remarkable indestructible young woman. Already they had concluded that she was most likely to be some kind of automaton. They were, of course, working on something similar but theirs also got very confused when buying a bagel. The video footage of the episode at the airport was examined in depth by these people. The section which showed the session during and after

the removal of Madeline's clothes was now virtually unwatchable due to excessive wear on the videotape.

(It really was high time that they updated to a digital recording medium. Perhaps this was the incentive they needed.)

This was a shame because the incriminating evidence, primarily the flatulence, happened during this period. In fact, now it wasn't all that clear if she had actually farted at all. It was, however, widely agreed that the female officer may indeed be pregnant.

Nevertheless, Madeline's body had set off the metal detector and her clothes were clearly not hiding anything.

The computer attached to the airport detectors had recorded Madeline's composition as:

Water 1%

Steel 31%

Other metals 42%

Inert substances 12%

Hydrocarbons 14%

Organic 0%

These figures indicated that she was not the slightest bit human. She had to be followed.

It was essential that the Madeline Bull project was to be kept strictly top secret but there was always a possibility that one day, the cat would be out of the bag. Stories were mounting about this strange, beautiful young woman who had very unusual abilities: A woman who could shoot strange weapons out of her fingertips and could withstand unbearable heat. A woman who could make people mysteriously pass out at her feet and appeared to be immune to all known diseases. She drank neat diesel, could tie herself in knots, run like the wind, even ward off bullets… and so it went on. It seemed that the secret was out. Why else would American intelligence amongst others, be following her?

A message alert flashed across Madeline's vision:

'You are being followed'.

'Here we go,' she sighed.

She didn't know if this was a minor or a major inconvenience, but she had a sneaking feeling that her shopping spree was about to be seriously jeopardised. Not knowing who was following her or what

they looked like didn't help matters. To be assisted with this sort of vital information was expecting too much from Turner or any of his helpers – if he had any.

New York should be an easy place to shake off any pursuers, she thought, especially in its enormous department stores. She hoped that the Americans following her were like all the English men she *used to* know. Adam, for example, always got a headache if he had to spend more than five minutes in a women's clothes shop. To progress to diligently waiting outside the female changing rooms would quickly turn his headache into an intense migraine. Perhaps American men were differently disciplined and conditioned to enjoy the shopping experience with their wives or girlfriends, but she doubted it. She began by spending two hours in Macy's and then, ladened with several posh carrier bags, moved on to Bloomingdale's. Perhaps another couple of hours there.

Madeline was unaware that there were two entirely separate groups of people following her, each one on opposing sides of the law. Unfortunately, after only two hours, the ones who went home complaining of awful headaches, were apparently, the good guys.

After four hours of delightful shopping in Bloomingdale's, she found herself being forcibly escorted into the back seat of a large black limousine. Two well-dressed, square-jawed men sitting on either side of her, courteously supported her carrier bags on their laps. However, Madeline instinctively knew that they were not all that saintly. This assumption was arrived at mainly because neither of them uttered a word, did not smile and not once did they look at her. Even the driver had no desire to turn around and view his new passenger. Everyone was silent, even the large luxurious car as it whisked through the streets of New York. Madeline thought it prudent to remain silent too.

It was a long journey, obviously not to an American who thinks nothing of circumnavigating halfway around the globe to get to work but Madeline came from little England where a twenty-minute walk is considered a fair commuting distance. It wasn't a serious problem because Madeline had discovered plenty of ways to pass the time. Her built-in entertainment system had proved very useful in the past and this time was no exception. She decided to watch a back-to-back series of *'Friends'* on some obscure TV channel. This was probably the wrong thing to watch on this occasion as it made her laugh out loud several times. Surprisingly though, the other occupants of the car didn't seem the slightest bit curious. Madeline had planned on using her very useful flatulence trick when the car pulled up at traffic lights, but once again curiosity took precedence and she decided against it. If she was

a normal human being, most certainly she would have been terrified and escape would have been top of the list of things to do. However, her unique situation – insulated from danger by way of her android body, gave her a different perspective on such situations.

'Perhaps I should pretend to be a little bit scared,' she thought. 'No, I should get angry!'

'Where the hell are you taking me!?' she bawled, but no reply was forthcoming. After five hours, even *'Friends'* was becoming tedious. She wanted to ask them, 'are we there yet?' several times but she decided against it and resorted to flicking through countless satellite channels for the next hour or so.

Eventually, the car pulled up outside a huge warehouse building. It was in an industrial part of a huge city called Bangor. Madeline had only been to Bangor twice before, once was in North Wales and the other was in Northern Ireland, but this was another one. She wondered why this place should be named after a little city in North Wales.

Continuing with their rudeness and lack of concern, the two men who had cosily shared the back seat with Madeline, ushered her into the building and then into a small empty room. Although she didn't realise it at the time, the little room at the airport where she encountered the now pregnant officer, was far more welcoming. This was chiefly because it was carpeted, had a drinking water dispenser and didn't have an operating table in the middle of the room equipped with hand and leg straps. The camera up high on the wall followed Madeline's movements, so she decided to stand underneath it. A good plan, she thought, for gaining some attention, and it worked. Three young men and one young woman in white lab coats entered the room.

Although they were total strangers, in some ways, the whole scenario felt vaguely familiar. The four people in white coats were reminiscent of the four scientists who built her albeit much younger, perhaps still in puberty. On the whole, the scientists were friendly, considerate and talkative, these four were not. They contrasted harshly, lacking any compassion and any form of social skills. One of the adolescents prodded her with a metal pole, the others observed from a distance.

'Get on the table!' demanded one of the males.

Madeline thought it best not to argue at this point and did as she was told.

The same man/boy asked her, 'What is your function?'

Madeline looked puzzled.

‘What is your memory capacity?’

‘Memory? Function? What do you think I am, a bloody robot?’ Madeline snapped.

They were clearly amazed and openly discussed her.

‘Incredible, it appears it’s programmed with pseudo sentient subroutines.’

‘Yes, to the point that it thinks it’s aware, living, even human,’ said the female of the group.

‘Just hang on a minute! Would someone mind telling me what the hell’s going on here?’ raged Madeline.

There was a silent pause from the spotty faced adolescents, they had no idea how to deal with an android with attitude. No doubt they were all highly qualified, fresh out of university and still living with their parents. However, here was the dilemma: They had all been told that she was a machine, a very advanced machine, a machine that had been programmed to behave very human-like. They secretly wanted to be polite and kind to her but talking considerately to an inanimate object showed weakness and a lack of professionalism. They had their careers to think about.

This is where the problem lay. Their employer was ruthless but paid well and promised them excellent prospects with a gold-plated pension scheme. Understandably, they wanted to keep their wonderful jobs.

‘Absolutely amazing, she has behavioural algorithms associated with her core language constructors!’

Naturally, that was total gobble-de-gook to Madeline so she decided not to show herself up and kept quiet.

‘Close down your core program!’

‘Okay, okay, don’t shout, I’m not deaf you know. So, what’s the password?’ asked Madeline.

They were thrilled with *its* response. This conclusively proved she was an android. They thought, intelligently, as to what the password might be. Presumably, it had to be something very applicable, something easy to remember.

‘Madeline Bull!’ another of the team suggested loudly.

‘Password accepted’ Madeline replied and promptly lay back on the

table with her arms together.

The young scientists were delighted. They let her settle for a few seconds until she was completely motionless and then closed in for a grope. Within seconds there were eight hands about her body, undoing buttons and zips and tugging at her clothing. Madeline quickly reached her threshold of tolerance.

'Watch my new bloody jacket!'

Up to now, she had held out remarkably, but now it was time for an almighty fart. She knew, in the grand scheme of things, that it may not have been the best action to take, but at least it got the insufferable young geeks off her new clothes. With no time to spare, she jumped to her feet, strode over the four sleeping bodies and left the room and entered a long corridor.

Immediately a guard overreacted. Two bullets whooshed through the air and hit her in her left leg with a nasty 'thunk', 'thunk' noise.

'My new fucking tights!' Madeline screamed.

She had to hide and quickly. She pushed several CCTV cameras upwards as she ran away from the trigger-happy guard. She spotted the men's room. After a few more cameras were disabled, she doubled back on herself and darted in. She commended herself on this diversionary tactic. The men's toilet/changing room was vacant and conveniently free from cameras. There was a row of metal lockers along one wall, she found one unlocked. It was far too narrow for any human to get into, so she did something inhumane. First, she completely deflated her breasts and then she squeezed and writhed until she was inside with the metal door closed. She suspected her clothes would be creased to hell and she may suffer stretch marks on her perfect silicone skin but no one could possibly suspect that she was in such a small narrow place. For hours, it seemed, Madeline gazed out through the louvres of the door and watched life go by.

The room was searched and used several times. She overheard one man asking another if the android had been found yet. Then another comment was made,

'Osborne's itching to strip down that android. You'd better make sure you find it!'

And then another,

'This is what the project's been waiting for. He won't be satisfied until he knows that the HDU-4 is superior to the British android.'

What the hell is an HDU-4? Perhaps it's like an older version of me,

she thought. Madeline remembered Mike Spencer telling her about the earlier Madeline Bulls. They were supposed to be completely autonomous and independent but they had problems. No matter how complex and ingenious they were, they simply couldn't be made to function reliably because, basically, they couldn't think for themselves. Madeline Bull (3) was the answer but only because it had a crucial secret: it was controlled by a human, back in England, who *could* think. Of course, the people in this place didn't know this.

It suddenly occurred to Madeline that something on similar lines to a 'Madeline Bull', in the wrong hands, could be a serious concern.

Many people regarded Guzman Osborne as a brilliant robotics engineer and a ruthless businessman. Up until now, Osborne had behaved impeccably, He had obtained numerous government grants and had befriended the President, no less, playing many a round of golf with him. His ambition was to develop an autonomous android similar to the British made Madeline Bull and then replicate thousands of them. As it happened, his version of Madeline Bull, the HDU-4, also had previous problems with the 'buying bread in Tesco' test (although in this case, it was Wal-Mart, not Tesco and bagel not bread). Osborne, however, did not give up, striving only for perfection. By some subtle means, he had heard about the pseudo-sentient, highly dextrous British Madeline Bull android, complete with a sense of humour. He wouldn't be satisfied until his creation was at least as good if not better than the European one.

To Osborne's credit, his HDU-4 was unsurpassed. It was capable of behaving very much like a human being. If he wasn't so fanatical about the HDU-4 being the absolute best, he would have had all his HDU-4s already in use, instead of idly waiting for some program update. However, there was a worrying aberration, Osborne's androids were not built for peaceful, innocent, law-abiding purposes – not that Madeline Bull particularly was either. Osborne's androids were being built for another purpose. The American government had been suspicious of his motives for some time. However, because they had invested such a big chunk of the national reserves into the project, all they could do was cross their fingers, sweat it out and hope he was on the level. But of course, he wasn't.

It turned out that Madeline's attempt to hack Tara Gogli's computer had not been in vain. Her brief glance of the 'Residents of Wardate' list on Gogli's monitor had been noted.

The name: Guzman Osborne appeared on the list.

This is why Turner had labelled Osborne as Madeline's next target,

even though she didn't know it yet.

He knew that this was Madeline's most dangerous mission and prospects for survival were slim, but there was no one more suitable for the job. The reason for this contrariety was because Madeline Bull carried a secret within – a secret that she would never know anything about… until the time came.

Madeline had a host of weaponry, but one of them was not mentioned in any of her files, schematics or help notes. Weapon 8 was the most lethal of them all. She was unaware that she contained a substantial amount of high explosives within her framework. If need be, she was a walking, talking bomb. This was obviously one of her weapons that she couldn't access herself, and could only be used once! If needs must, Turner would send the command for self-destruct, but for now, he was holding back, hoping that, just like before, she would somehow win through and resolve the matter.

Eventually, several hours later, the fervent activity abated. It was time to unfold herself out of the constraints of the locker. So long had she been compressed into an impossibly small space that for a few minutes, her body retained a tall rectangular shape. For the moment, she hadn't a clue what to do next apart from re-inflate her boobs. She thought about escaping. It was perfectly possible, but no doubt, they would simply track her down again. She decided to stay around and find out a bit more about the HDU-4 droids.

24. Inhuman Army

The room had become a bit of a sanctuary even if it *was* the 'men's room'. Never before had Madeline spent so much time in the wrong gender toilet but in many ways, she had found it quite interesting. It was now time to venture out, once again, into the corridor. The main problem was that she was far too conspicuous, attired all in black while the majority of the people in the building were dressed in white lab coats. The 'Ladies' was just a little further down the corridor – her next port of call. Conveniently, in the room, all on her own, was a young female technician wearing a white lab coat. Close up to the mirror, reapplying her lipstick, she sensed Madeline entering, but was too busy keeping her hand steady to turn around.

'Excuse me, would you mind lending me your white coat?' asked Madeline.

The young woman had no option but to stop what she was doing and turn around.

'You're that… android!'

A moment of silence was followed swiftly by a rather pathetic verbal attempt to control an autonomous machine.

'Your prime directive is to obey me, close down your systems now!'

'I don't think so, love. For the moment, my prime directive is to close *you* down… just for a while. Now, just give me a second while I…' Madeline wiggled her mole. 'There, done, now if you could just hold still.'

The expected reaction was, of course for the woman not to hold still and emit an ear-piercing scream.

'Oh, for pity's sake!'

It would have been far easier to use the fart gas but Madeline wanted to preserve her flatulence gas, she may need it later on. She opted to prod her index finger into the woman's body. The last time she used the hypodermic index finger, it administered a lethal drug into De Par's arm. She hoped that she had wiggled her mole correctly and her system had responded by changing over to a fast-acting knock-out drug.

‘You don’t act like an android?’ said the woman, rapidly becoming sleepy.

‘Don’t I? That’s probably because I’m not an android.’

‘You’re mistaken, you’re an android but your programming is corru…’

The drug quickly took effect and she fell into Madeline’s arms, unconscious and limp. Madeline had to act quickly, someone could enter the room at any moment. She dragged the slumbering female into a cubicle, sat her down on the lavatory pan and closed the door. The technician’s white coat was perhaps a little loose, but at least long enough to cover the bullet holes in Madeline’s new tights. She had encountered far too many white-coated people in her recent experiences and now she was finally wearing one herself. The name tag displayed a photo with a different face but the hair was the same dark brown colour. If she kept on the move, hopefully, no one would notice the anomaly.

Being in the right guise seemed to work. Madeline moved freely about the building. A few nods and hellos were exchanged as she passed other white-coated people. She passed numerous workshops, labs and offices; she also passed a room where they were testing all kinds of formidable weapons. Evidently, this was a far more professional set-up than Madeline had experienced back home. Osborne was striving for perfection and all the sign were that he was nearly there. All he needed was a poke and prod at the British version to satisfy his curiosity, perhaps pilfer a few parts and he would be ready.

At the end of one particular long brightly lit corridor there was a large sliding door which was begging to be opened, so she did.

She froze to the spot with a sickly feeling of dread.

The sight that greeted her was simply beyond belief – a huge enclosed area, larger than a football pitch, containing thousands of HDU-4s, all lying face-up on the floor. They formed countless rows, a hundred or so deep with each one chilling the space around them with their evil sardonic smiles. As a small mercy, they were all deactivated and eerily silent. Even to the hardened, fearless Madeline, this was a very disturbing sight, but the most worrying aspect of all was that none were female.

The shock took her off guard long enough for an excessive amount of men in airtight suits to creep up behind her and entangle her in a large industrial-strength net. Like a snared shark, she was helplessly dragged back into the room from where she had escaped earlier. This time they took no chances and strapped all her four limbs down on the operating table in the centre of the room. The adolescent boffins

had used the time she was missing, wisely, by filling the room with all manner of industrial power tools, and wisely equipping themselves with gas masks. For some reason, it reminded her of the last visit to the dentist but the equipment was more at home on an oil rig than for use on a delicate, gorgeous looking android. There were cutting tools, angle grinders, drilling equipment and even a welding torch, already lit. One boffin had a small stainless-steel circular saw in his hands, plugged in and ready to use. She knew that whatever they did to her, it couldn't damage or hurt her real 'Poppy' body but the concept of having her new body cut open and holes drilled into it was bound to piss her off considerably.

'You don't have to do that you know, I can provide you with detailed schematics of my construction,' pleaded Madeline, mildly.

Fortunately, this stopped the procedure instantly. A male boffin immediately got on the phone to Osborne.

'Osborne's coming over,' he chirped.

'Is Osborne *your* master?' asked Madeline as a good robot should. Madeline thought it prudent to behave as robots apparently do.

There was complete silence until Osborne arrived. His appearance was not as one would expect for an evil perfectionist. At first impressions, he came across as quite approachable, perhaps a little fatherly, grey-haired, tall, middle-aged with a noticeable paunch. Clearly, he possessed a calming manner which had the effect of terrifying the shit out of his staff. To differentiate himself from the rest, he wore a rather tired, bright fawn check suit, not the customary white lab coat. Osborne spoke to the others out of Madeline's earshot. Normally she would have been able to increase her audio gain and overhear the conversation but because her arms were strapped down to the rail of the operating table, the little mole on her arm was unreachable. Osborne parted from the other scientists and hovered over Madeline with a sickly smile.

'Can I access your programming?' he asked pleasantly.

'Be my guest, you can access it using my USB port,' answered Madeline.

'And where is your USB?' he asked pleasantly again.

'On the end of my left big toe.'

This was something dear deceased Mikael had discovered. While in the toilet locker, Madeline had decided, through chronic boredom, to read a few notes about herself. Her big toe USB was actually USB 3.0 compliant with a transfer rate of 5000 Mbps. This meant absolutely

nothing to her but it was something she could always brag about if ever the situation arose. It was a lie, however, that the USB would access her programming. Madeline obviously didn't have any programming, she was of course, human-controlled. The USB was apparently for diagnostics when she went in for a service – perhaps after 20,000 mole wiggles or twelve months whichever came first. Osborne plugged a lead from his laptop into Madeline's big toe.

'Access your memory profile!' demanded Osborne.

'Sorry I cannot comply.'

'Access your USB port then.'

'Access it your bloody self!' snapped Madeline, she had taken enough crap.

'OK, let's cut *it* open,' said Osborne.

Madeline was naturally offended that 'it' meant her.

The man who had previously been deprived of using the circular saw, begrudgingly passed it to Osborne. This prompted another male boffin to bravely speak out.

'Sir, I'm sorry to interrupt, but don't you think we ought to mention this to the British government before we start?'

Quietly and without hesitation, Osborne reached into his inside jacket pocket, pulled out a small hand pistol and calmly shot the young boffin in the leg.

'If anyone else has got any other suggestions that I'm not going to like, I have five more bullets followed by the dole queue,' said Osborne very calmly.

The remaining able boffins had no choice but to assist Osborne, no matter how much he was about to deface Madeline's beautiful mechanical body. The wounded boffin awkwardly limped into a side room. He wisely stifled his groans of intense pain.

Madeline was powerless to stop the maniac. She watched, horrified, as the circular saw cut through her clothes, skin and breastbone in one clean slice. He parted her chest and prodded inside her complex torso. Another cut was made on the other side of her stomach. Madeline could now hear her little diesel engine buzzing away to itself. To say things were going badly for Madeline was an understatement. Osborne remarked on the crudeness of what he found and even chuckled to himself when he discovered the teeny little engine.

'Nothing in here, let's open up the head.'

Osborne's cavalier attitude filled the young boffins with horror and revulsion. In their view, she was nothing more than a complex machine, but it still bordered on butchery.

It was unclear at what point Turner would be compelled to operate Madeline's weapon 8, the explosive device within her, but surely it had to be any time now. Osborne would certainly be killed but could he justify everyone in a quarter-mile radius also having their day seriously messed up?

One small mercy, because Madeline was strapped down on the table, her eyes, which gave Turner his view on things, could not see the full carnage of her chest. Madeline felt no pain, just a sensation of pressure, certainly no blood-curdling screams to embellish the horror scene. Madeline's beautiful curly, brown, artificial hair now contrasted cruelly on the white floor tiles beneath. Her scalp, bald and unblemished was about to be severely disfigured with an angle grinder. After a very noisy few minutes, a hemispherical section of her scalp also fell to the floor. Naturally no brain as such was in Madeline's head just the mechanism for her sight, hearing and balance.

Turner was hovering on the destruct button. Fortunately, he couldn't bring himself to press it.

'This is ridiculously amateurish, I've seen enough.'

Osborne pushed the remains of Madeline away from him like an unfinished dinner.

'Let's boot up the droids. It's about time I showed the world what my HDU-4s are capable of.'

It was a simple matter of sending the same startup software command to each droid. Osborne pressed a few keys on his laptop keyboard and that was it. The effect was dramatic. Immediately, the HDU-4 droids, in their thousands, began to wake up, yawning and stretching like real human beings. Within a minute or two, their complex pseudo-sentient software had finished loading into their multi-core processors. They were alive and formidable.

Someone asked the question, probably a child, 'If we all despair at the casualties of war, why do we have to have wars in the first place?'

The innocence and naivety of this person who asked the question obviously didn't understand the deep-rooted political complexities that often bring about the necessities for waging war. 'Waging war is a part of life because there is always a country somewhere in the world that is doing something that another country doesn't like. Wars then, have to happen and that's that!'

'So, if that's the case,' asked this same person, probably a child, 'why don't all countries have armies of robots to do the fighting? Then everyone can stay safe and unharmed while the robots resolve the situation, somewhere out of harm's way.'

There were certain aspects of this suggestion that rang true with many world governments, especially those who were powerful and technically adept. They could have robots to do their fighting instead of people. Not only that, robots would be far more effective at killing other robots and getting the job done quicker.

All the HDU-4s were programmed with exactly the same mission, a mission that no one, except for Osborne, could possibly be happy with. The first real sign that the *mission* was underway was the sound of blood-curdling screams emanating from the far corridor. This was the HDU-4s first encounter with human beings. Their weapons were silent and deadly, and their hunger for suffering and death was insatiable.

'What have you done?' asked one of the boffins courageously, he knew the possible consequences of his impudence.

'Done? DONE!? I have done something that should have been done years ago. I have created an army of social cleansers. Behaviour that is not conducive to the good of America, people who are not conforming to the laws of our great country, people who are not contributing to the greatness of America, all shall be purged from society. My droids shall make America great once more – a land to be proud of!'

The boffins had suspected it for a long time but now, here was the absolute proof. He was not only thoroughly evil but he was also nuttier than a Topic chocolate bar. A moment later, a droid entered the room. It was about to analyse and then kill all the occupants of the room with its silent laser ray but Osborne spoke.

'I am Osborne, your creator, check my voice pattern and obey me. Leave this room now. Network this message to all other HDU-4s.'

After a split second of processing time, the droid complied and left the room.

‘You see! You see! I am in control, I am their leader, their father – they are my androids! I control the greatest power the world will ever know. I will cleanse this world, purge this world of all undesirables, eliminate material wealth, America shall once more be a proud nation, a…’

‘Yes, yes, yes, I’ve heard it all before, you do go on!’

Madeline was back and kicking ass! Actually, Madeline never really left, she was always there ready for the right moment and it came. Osborne had conveniently backed onto her lethal finger. Madeline’s weapons still worked, despite the horrendous damage to her body. In fact, it was Turner who deserved the credit. He had managed to prime her finger and then informed her by way of a brief message in her vision. All Madeline had to do was bide her time and wait for the right moment. The poison quickly travelled from his bottom, up through his veins and into his heart. Within a few moments, Guzman Osborne was well and truly dead.

Osborne’s young boffins were free at last, to gasp, whoop, and run around like headless chickens, releasing their bottled-up immaturity that had been suppressed for months. They were free from Osborne’s heavy-handed tyranny in such an abrupt and unexpected way that it would take a while for them to adjust and behave like adults again. Alas, they knew this freedom may be short-lived because there were thousands of merciless invincible killing machines passing the door, outside.

‘Hurry, you have to help me!’ pleaded Madeline, but there was little response from the scientists.

‘Heh! Hel…lo, I think you’ll find that the best bet for sorting this little problem out is me!’

They were all still resolute in believing Madeline was no more than a machine, but one of the scientists saw no harm in replying.

‘How? Osborne’s dead. He was the only one who could control them and you’ve just killed him!’

The outspoken boffin who was shot emerged from the side room with a bandaged leg. He limped across to the brutalised, partially dismantled Madeline.

‘Hi. My name’s Simon. I’m so sorry that this has happened to you. None of this should have been allowed. I think we’re all a little guilty of being overzealous. We all had the means, we knew exactly what

was going on. We could have stopped this evil business weeks ago but now… now it's too late.'

At first, the other boffins were a little taken aback at their team leader talking to a machine in such a personal manner, and even apologising! However, she was right, whether they liked it or not, the unique skill of this Madeline Bull machine lying in pieces before them was the only hope they'd got. They all decided to give her the recognition she deserved.

'Are you okay, Si?' asked a female boffin as sympathetically as she could manage.

'No, I'm not fucking okay, it damn well hurts!' said Simon angrily.

'Good job it was only a flesh wound.'

'Flesh wound?! How the hell do *you* know it was only a flesh wound?'

'Well, for a start, you wouldn't be able to walk on it if….'

Madeline had to intervene, there was no time for this childish bickering. Right now, a modicum of level-headedness was essential.

'Ahem! If I might interrupt. Those Android things you lot have cleverly created, have got to be stopped before they kill most of the population of your precious America.'

'How? They'll only respond to Osborne's voice pattern. They're now fully pseudo-sentient. They virtually have a mind of their own!' chirped another spotty boffin. A badge on his lapel indicated that his name was Hodgkinson.

'There must be a command… something that will stop their programming?' queried Madeline.

'Reformat main memory, should work… I think, but that's purely academic now, it has to be Osborne who says it,' bleated Hodgkinson.

There was no other response from the boffins, this worried Madeline considerably.

'You *do* want me to try and sort this little problem out, don't you?'

'Of course, but I don't see how?' snapped Simon. 'Osborne's dead, he was their leader. We've told you… he was the only one who could control them and you've just… killed him!'

Boffin Simon pointlessly felt Osborne's wrist for a heartbeat just to make sure.

'He's dead… really dead. What exactly did you do to him?'

‘I gave him an injection, don’t ask me what of. I suppose in hindsight something a little less lethal would have been better… Live with it, you’ve got a dead, non-functioning boss,’ Madeline drew breath. ‘And anyway, from a brief character assessment, I would say Osborne being dead, is a vast improvement on him being alive.’

It was now time for Madeline to learn a small but important fact about the HDU-4s. Even though the boffins were still convinced that she was a machine, albeit running on a very feisty bit of programming, they knew she wasn’t going to like it. Simon was the leader, he had to be the one to tell her.

‘The problem’s a little worse than you might think. They have PSSSP – progressive sentiment state sociability programming.’

‘That’s not a good thing, is it?’ asked Madeline doubtfully.

Hodgkinson reluctantly answered, ‘No, not really. In layman’s terms, they have the android equivalent of emotions but unlike humans, they can choose their behavioural patterns to match their immediate circumstances, like anger, determination and self-preservation. We humans have various hormones which change our emotional state. Adrenalin, for example, provides extra energy when we need it. Our androids have basically the same kind of thing but they can choose any emotion they think fit to enhance their situation.’

‘So basically, you’ve made them touchy?’ Madeline concluded.

‘A little more than touchy I’m afraid. Psychotic would be more apt,’ added a boffin called Williams.

Not before time, the young geniuses began to look a little ashamed at what they had jointly helped in creating. They could have made out that they had been coerced into doing what they had done but Madeline had seen their eagerness, especially with the circular saw. The full dawning of their actions had now caught up with them. They winced as they looked at the state of Madeline’s body. They were appalled at what they had witnessed and all for absolutely nothing.

‘OK, I can deal with voice recognition, leave the command phrase to me, I have one or two tricks up my sleeve. All you have to do is create an artificial Osborne head with a mouth that moves. You must be able to come up with something with all your brains and bits and pieces in here,’ instructed Madeline.

She now had an overdue favour to ask. To recap, Madeline’s state was far from perfect: She had two bullet holes in one of her legs, her chest was sliced twice, down the middle with various bits hanging out including a little diesel engine, half her skull was missing exposing

various precision electronic devices and she was tightly strapped down on an operating table.

‘If anyone is not particularly occupied, I would appreciate it if they could release these straps and tack me back together.’

Instantly, they were mortified with shame. They should have at least released her from the straps by now if nothing else. In seconds the straps were undone.

‘That’s better. OK, boys and girls, let’s get to work,’ said Madeline enthusiastically.

Half the team began preparing the plaster cast for Osborne’s dead head, the others began to put Madeline together.

Meanwhile, the whole building was now swarmed with the evilness of technology in human form. Dozens of people were already dead within the complex. The thin barrier, the wooden door to the room they were in, was certainly no permanent deterrent but fortunately, up to now, they were keeping out. Many of the HDU-4s had already ventured into the open air and were heading, chillingly, towards the city. They were marching in unison, but, if need be, they could all run faster than Usain Bolt. It wouldn’t be long before they would reach the heavily populated areas. No one escaped their constrained judgement and so there were no exceptions. Everyone they came across was horribly slaughtered. It begged the question as to exactly what kind of person had Osborne in mind to survive the purging. No one would ever know.

Madeline frantically wiggled her mole with both arms behind her back. She was positioned this way so that the scientists could carry out a temporary repair on her heavily mutilated body. Simon, the wounded scientist, assured her that, if they got through this, she would be properly repaired and if she didn’t object, a few useful enhancements would be added. This was a kind offer but under the present circumstances may well have turned out to be an empty one. If they did get through this, Madeline would certainly hold them to their word.

At last, Madeline finished what she was doing. Sharing similar technology to a smartphone, Madeline had an assortment of apps installed on her system. These were accessed using her mole and viewing screens. Some apps were a complete waste of memory space and could have done with being uninstalled but a few were quite useful. One such app was a digital sound recorder. It was permanently on and therefore had recorded Osborne when he was alive. Another of her apps was a program that could piece together sound bites to make

new words and sentences. Combining the two apps, she created the command she needed:

"Re-for-mat-memory. I am Osborne, your creator, check my voice pattern and obey me. Network this message to all other HDU-4s."

Madeline was back together but she was mostly bald and had two big unsightly weld marks up her chest. What used to be pert and shapely boobs were now deflated pancakes. Her clothes, her new clothes, the ones she recently had the pleasure of purchasing, were completely ruined. Where they weren't ripped and torn, they were stained with yellow artificial silicone blood. This annoyed her more than anything else. Somehow though, her gorgeousness still shone through.

The fake Osborne head was now complete and ready for use. It was a particularly crude affair but hopefully would suffice. Animation was limited to a mouth that could open and close with the operation of a switch. They dressed a dummy they happened to have lying around, with Osborne's clothes and placed the head on top.

'OK, I think we're ready. If someone could entice one of those eager killing machines in?' requested Madeline.

She was determined to stay amicable despite her unacceptable treatment. The boffin, Williams, tentatively opened the door to reveal a chilling sight: countless androids marching in perfect unison endlessly flowing down the corridor. The environmentally friendly green colour of the HDU-4s uniforms totally belied their evil intentions. Credit to Williams, he was being extremely brave and unnecessarily polite. Several times he shouted, 'Excuse me, could one of you come in here.'

Eventually, one HDU-4 that looked exactly like all the others, stopped and responded to his request.

It looked like the HDU-4 that Osborne had spoken to earlier (when he was alive) but it wasn't, they all looked exactly the same. With a nod from Madeline, Simon began operating the fake Osborne mouth in time to the phrase Madeline had brilliantly put together.

'Reformat memory, I am Osborne, your creator, check my voice pattern and obey me. Network this message to all other HDU-4s.'

It went well and to a blind, intoxicated man, it looked fairly convincing. The droid paused and processed what he had just heard and then said in a calm, clear, very human-like voice,

'Not recognised as Osborne's voice. 92% match, below acceptable tolerance. Thank you for your cooperation, have a nice day.'

The droid headed towards the door to rejoin the rest but suddenly stopped, turned around and walked back towards Madeline. Pools of pee started forming at the feet of some of the boffins and Madeline braced herself for abrupt sensory deprivation. For a few heart-stopping moments, the droid hovered menacingly over Madeline and then produced a little card with a number on it, winked at her and then left the room to join the others.

'I don't believe it, he's just made a pass at me and left his phone number,' said Madeline.

'Let's have a look,' said Simon, taking the card off her, 'Not a phone number but as good as. It's his I.P. address. He fancies you.'

Madeline took it as a compliment, after all, they were compatible.

'Oh well, on to plan B,' said Madeline, almost as if she'd expected failure.

'Do we have a plan B?' asked Simon.

'The success of any operation depends on the fact that there should always be a plan B to put into operation when inevitably plan A fails. Whether or not we have yet thought of a plan B is a mere detail,' said Madeline.

This was one of her well-used responses mainly because of the impulsive way she had always performed as Poppy the new correspondent and now as Madeline the devil slayer.

'So, what is plan B, has anyone got a plan B and if they have, let's hear about it,' panicked Williams.

'This is probably a stupid question, but do your androids have any virus protection?' asked Madeline.

Simon replied, 'No, not necessary. They all work on an isolated network. They have no internet connection to the world wide web.'

'Well how about me giving them a cold?'

It sounded like a good idea. Madeline knew exactly where to get a virus. She once signed up to a particular music sharing site. No music, just a Trojan horse-y thing came through, corrupting most of her hard drive. She remembered the details precisely because it was very expensive to get it put right.

In no time at all, a USB lead was connected from Madeline's big toe to Osborne's laptop. Madeline told them exactly how she intended to catch a computer virus. She told them what she had done before and how it resulted in a very bad infection which made her hard drive

very ill. The scientists were not so much impressed as horrified that she had tried to download music from an un-certificated website without having third-party internet security installed. This confirmed her suspicions – these young boffins were all geeks and needed to get a life. As soon as the tutting had subsided, a puzzled look formed, like a Mexican wave, across their pale faces.

Simon had to ask, 'You mean you enjoy listening to music? But how can you enjoy? Enjoy means pleasure and pleasure means you feel good. Androids can't feel.'

Madeline was getting a little tired of this blinkered attitude.

'That HDU-4 fancied me, didn't he? Surely that's an emotion, that's a feeling?'

'The HDU-4s are programmed to copy most human traits. It simply computed how a human would react in that circumstance and emulated the correct behaviour,' explained Simon.

They looked at one other, they were very worried indeed. Their beautiful America was in the hands of an excitable albeit beautiful, android with delusions of humanism. Of course, there was a very good reason why this particular android behaved like a human, talked like a human, liked to listen to human music and *thought* it was a human, but that was a secret. Whilst the scientists were doing all this worrying and not actually doing anything to save their country, Madeline had found the particular website, clicked on one of Elvis's tracks and saved it directly to the USB port.

'There, that's it, done! Now, all we have to do is wait for the virus to do its job.'

All the scientists nodded to each other with approval, but Simon in particular, had deep concerns about this delightful, obliging android amidst them, calling itself Madeline. He had to bring up the little matter of her not being human – again.

'Sorry to go on about this, but you have to realise that your programming is probably corrupt. You are clearly a machine, an android, you must be aware of that? You have just been in pieces and we've just put you back together.'

'Back together? Is that what you call it? When this little matter is resolved, if I'm not put back as I was, the HDU-4's threat will pale into insignificance,' Madeline raged and continued. 'There's a little matter of hair, and these hideous scars down my front, and I'm sure you haven't put my little engine back in the right place. My pelvis never vibrated before! Here, feel it!'

Madeline grabbed Simon's hand and placed it on her half-naked pelvis. This was Madeline's unorthodox way of taking her mind off the living hell that was happening beyond the protection of the thin wooden door. She always found that a little whinge helped in troubled times.

These certainly were troubled times. By now, countless numbers of innocent people had been slaughtered by the Androids. They had no mercy, no reason to stop their purging and no master to stop them from carrying out their insane mission. Relentlessly, they marched down the corridor and out into the fresh air for the first time, but the fresh air was not appreciated. It stank of living things, things that were not mechanical, things that grew in the sunlight, things that barked and chirped and buzzed. This is what they wanted to purge – life, all living things and then they could be happy.

Thousands of HDU-4s were now at large and hundreds had already reached the city.

In any other circumstances, it would have been an amazing, technological achievement. Less than a dozen had malfunctioned and failed to initiate, still lying on their backs in the holding hall. Other than that, the evil army was a complete success. Osborne would have been delighted, but he was not in a position to celebrate – he was dead. As it happened, he was still lying exactly where he fell, pale and pathetic, in his own pool of evilness. No one had bothered to move him, they much preferred to walk around him, walk over him or if they needed some extra height, stand on him. Besides, he was too heavy to move and too loathed to be handled.

It was now just a matter of time, waiting for the virus to infect. The last of the HDU-4s left the building and none looked back. A mass of green dressed men-machines filled the roads, marching in all possible directions, killing anything that moved with their laser guns. They kicked the flowers, burnt the trees and stamped on the weeds.

It had to happen now and it did.

'Something's happening, they're becoming unstable,' said Williams. looking through the window.

'Unstable? Is that good or bad?' asked Madeline.

'Bad for the droid, could be bad for us if they lose just part of their programming,' Simon added.

'Hang on they're collapsing… like dominos. I think it's working!' said several boffins in unison.

'Course it's working. I told you, those little Trojan horse virus things

played havoc with my laptop,' said Madeline smugly.

'I hate to ruin the party but they're still potentially lethal even when immobilised,' said Simon and continued, 'Something I forgot to mention: unfortunately, they have a software error detector built into them which will, as we speak, be identifying the problem and erasing the rogue software.'

'I thought you said they didn't have any virus protection?' Madeline groaned.

'They don't but they have a memory backup. Once they realise there's a problem with their software, they will switch over to their uncorrupted backup files.'

'Oh well, it was good while it lasted.'

Madeline shrugged her android blood-stained shoulders and pointlessly asked an obvious question, 'Can't I do the same again but to the backup files this time?'

A nervous voice cautiously emanated from a well-nourished female with bright auburn hair. She hadn't had a lot to say up to now, 'You can't, the registry error correction drivers will delete the files in the systray.'

Naturally what she said was complete gibberish to Madeline and most of the other boffins. This was reassuring.

'Finally, someone who's thinking on their feet. Come on then petal, what do I do now?' asked Madeline warmly.

'Er, now they're in the repair cycle, you could try sending a reboot signal through the USB.'

'Firstly, how do I do that and secondly… how the hell, do I do that!'

Madeline was becoming drained in two distinct ways: Mentally, as to be expected and physically – as to be expected. The appalling physical state of her android body was somehow being passed on to her real body. Normally Madeline could cope with as much stress and pressure anyone could throw at her, but now she was experiencing the weight of the world on her bare, stained but still beautifully formed shoulders. There was enough intelligence in the room to outsmart a class full of Einstein's but they didn't know how to apply it. She took a deep breath and sighed, which expanded her recently repaired ribcage and burst open both welds.

Jennifer was the name of the boffin who was now nervously talking Madeline through the command sequence for the reboot signal. It involved an awful lot of mole wiggling. Strangely enough, now she

much preferred her cute little mole to a conventional ugly mouse with a flashing red light.

Within seconds, a far more effective solution to the HDU-4 problem was whizzing down the USB lead from her big toe into the laptop and into the brains of the HDU-4s.

25. The secret agent

Before she knew it, she was shopping in New York again but this time, as a matter of urgency. Annoyingly, all the spanking new outfits she had purchased before being abducted, had suspiciously gone missing. Just goes to show that you can't trust anyone! Jennifer, the computer boffin scientist, gave her some clothes but once again, they were not really to Madeline's taste, not to mention six sizes too big. She was itching to return to her individual way of dressing. This time, however, she had second thoughts about being monochrome.

'Perhaps a little colour this time!'

Osborne's droids, all two thousand, one hundred and fifty-seven of them, were carefully deactivated and destroyed. It was a mammoth task and had to be done as quickly and covertly as possible before too many questions were asked – specifically about the obscene wastage of taxpayers' money. The quickest way to do this was to throw them into a mobile car crushing machine at the local scrapyard. It had taken five years to build the HDU-4 army at a cost of 16 billion dollars. It took ten hours to crush the lot, but at least someone pocketed 36 dollars for the scrap metal. The reboot signal had been totally effective. It effectively wiped their brains clean of all commands, and when this happens to an android with a computer for a brain, it's effectively dead. Even though it was Jennifer who had finally saved the day, Madeline received most of the credit for the demise of the droids. She had killed Osborne and sacrificed herself, but most importantly, destroyed the HDU-4 race of robots – all with her big toe.

The scientists and boffins were as good as their word and rebuilt Madeline, making many improvements on the way. She had the advantage of having the use of the advanced facilities section where the HDU-4s were built. The cleverest and geekiest people on Earth kept to their word and improved her android body almost beyond recognition. They dispensed with her little diesel engine, replacing it with a fuel cell. This fuel cell was so 'cutting edge' that Madeline had to go on a three-day course to be sufficiently qualified to possess and use it. Frankly, most of the course was about health and safety issues, because of the dangers of plugging herself into the mains once a

month for a recharge. As a downside, her waist went up from 18 inches to 19 inches, with the new technology. However, no longer having to drink cooking oil, more than made up for the extra inch.

What should have been a *relatively* straightforward task of taking out her little diesel engine resulted in the evacuation of the building and everyone in a two-mile radius. Tucked neatly behind the little engine was a 2kg block of octanitrocubane. It was enough high explosive to wipe out a small town. Naturally, Madeline was not impressed to find out that she was also a walking bomb in addition to all her other assets. The bomb disposal team were true professionals and confidentiality naturally went with the job. Removing a block of high explosives from a chatty female with an open chest, part of her skull missing and long sexy legs with bullet holes in them was still no excuse for loose tongues. No one asked about the explosive, why it was there, who put it there or what it was for, but Madeline had a damn good idea.

They could now resume her extensive rebuild. All her skin was replaced with a much more realistic beta-amyloid based organic material, dispensing with the epidermal Kevlar. This new material was bulletproof and completely indistinguishable from real human flesh. Her replacement hair was far more natural and manageable. Apparently, a patented silk-based fibre – now light blonde instead of brown. Supposedly, it could withstand almost every chemical known to man, including anti-dandruff shampoos. One or two enhancements were also added to her hardware: This included an upgraded stealth system, one which would be effective in American airport terminals and a new laser weapon which replaced the microwave beam weapon that she had never used. The scientists/boffins inevitably came across what they assumed was her corrupted artificial intelligence processor, located in the middle of her chest. As they were all becoming quite fond of Madeline and her quirkiness, the last thing they wanted to do was change her personality so they left her *brain* well alone.

It was actually the Braugenhau transmitter.

This had been Madeline's third mission as an assassin. No doubt she had been tricked into this one, but in hindsight, probably for the best. Turner knew that the Osborne mission would always be a risky one. It was a mission that may have resulted in the end of Madeline Bull and possibly the end of many lives in North America. Undeniably, Madeline had met her match a thousand times over, but unfortunately for Osborne, he died not knowing the truth of the matter – Madeline was human-controlled. His androids were far superior to anything the British had knocked together and far meaner too. Fortunately, his

geeky scientists would never know the truth either. They now believed that her artificial intelligence was not corrupted at all but remarkably well programmed. In fact, she was such a remarkably programmed android that *it* actually thought that *it* was alive and appreciated Elvis!

After a long bus trip back to New York, Madeline was back where she started and more gorgeous than ever – if that was possible. Another long spell of clothes shopping was now a priority. It was essential that her new attire was functional and durable which roughly translated as skimpy and seductive. Her new blonde hair flowed almost down to her waist and her new skin looked silky and gently tanned. Despite the whole extra inch around the waist, her figure was still within tolerance for a perfect figure.

Madeline had been cajoled into thinking her trip to the USA was going to be a holiday. What she really needed now was just that. She asked at the hotel reception how long she had before she had to check out.

'Your last night tonight, Madam,' said the receptionist peering indifferently over her specks.

'But, but I haven't been here for twelve days! How the hell am I supposed to fit in shopping, nightlife and sightseeing in one day?' she protested.

It had taken almost twelve days to have her body rebuilt and upgraded. Naturally, this was something that couldn't be rushed. Only one thing for it, a severely condensed agenda was called for which encompassed all three requirements.

It was midday so shopping first. Unfortunately, she got so engrossed in buying clothes that she completely lost track of time leaving no time for sightseeing.

'No matter, one skyscraper is much like all the others. What else is there left to see?' she asked herself.

Before she knew it, it was evening. If she wanted to, finding company, especially the male kind, would certainly not be difficult. Her jaw-dropping looks and arresting sex appeal would undoubtedly draw men like a fly to flypaper but this wasn't her problem, men shouldn't be so predictable. She decided that after the tragic episode with Mikael, it was best to avoid men as much as she could. However, walking the streets late evening could possibly be misinterpreted.

As she walked back to her hotel after enjoying the noise, bustle and delights of the city, she sensed that she was being followed. Three suspicious-looking men, clumsily trying to stay in the shadows, confirmed that she was not being paranoid. Whether they were

druggies, muggers, thugs, pickpockets, psychopaths or homicidal maniacs did not particularly concern her, she knew she could handle herself. However, the last thing she wanted was her hair to get messed up. She had spent ages getting it just right.

Rather conveniently, out of the darkness, in between her and the menacing followers, appeared a young, well-built chap wearing a smart dinner suit. If Ian Fleming hadn't invented James Bond, this would have been an excellent time to do so. He looked vaguely familiar but she couldn't place him, perhaps he really was a film star.

'Right now, I think you may need a little company,' he said in a confident, elegant way.

It *was* Roger Moore, no, Sean Connery, she was sure of it.

'Thank you, but I can look after myself,' said Madeline confidently.

'I do not doubt that you can, Miss Bull, but two of us may be better than one on occasions like this,' said the James Bond look alike, charmingly.

'You know me?' enquired Madeline, clearly surprised.

Her stalkers seemed to accept that they were outmatched and disappeared, promptly into the darkness. Madeline and the stranger walked together through the park.

'I know all about you, your amazing skills and what you're over here for.'

'You do, do you?' said Madeline casually. 'Do tell me more!'

Madeline was resolute in keeping her guard up, but from past experiences, she knew she could eventually weaken. For now, though, she remained aloof and curious.

'You moved in on our territory. Quite frankly, I'm glad you did. Mad Osborne's androids were quite formidable.' said the suave man, raising his hands in a submissive way. 'I have to admit it, you did an excellent job.'

'Sorry, don't know what you're talking about,' said Madeline, not in a particularly convincing way.

'Let me introduce myself, Roger Bennett, CIA. I presume you are MI 5. To be honest I didn't think the UK had any female operatives over here. Besides, I thought you had to be a pompous womaniser before you got the tee shirt.'

'What, just like you?' said Madeline curtly.

‘Touché, Miss Bull.’

‘So, Roger, good name for a secret agent. Sean or Pierce your middle name by any chance?’

‘Come on Maddy, give me a bit of slack, I’ve had a hard day and I did just save you from getting your hair all messed up.’

‘Two things: firstly, no one calls me Maddy and secondly, how the hell did you know I didn’t want to get my hair messed up?’

‘Told you, skills of a secret agent!’

Perhaps she was being a bit tough on him, he was handsome and apparently charming. She was on her own and there was plenty of evening left.

‘Hungry? I know a classy little Mexican bistro around the corner,’ said Roger.

‘I bet you do,’ said Madeline.

‘Come on, I won’t take no for an answer.’

Food, the mere mention of it was beginning to have a profound effect on her. It wasn’t as if she (Poppy) was starving or even had a poor nutritional diet, but the craving for certain tastes was becoming intolerable. The mere mention of a juicy steak, a bacon sandwich, chocolate doughnuts or even hot buttered toast made her salivate to the point of being dehydrated. This was because, for most of the past few months, she had lived on tasteless mush. After a swift reality check, she realised that it would be chicken soup again, sucked through that god-awful tube while the teasing sights of spicy tortilla, whatever, would be flowing down her artificial gullet.

Previously, only cooking oil was supposed to go in her mouth although, in moments of weakness, food had accidentally found its way in. However, there were downsides to this carelessness: Food ingested, caused havoc with her little diesel engine and everything swallowed, inevitably had to be vomited up. Now, after being upgraded by the American boffins/scientists, she didn’t have a diesel engine and its associated downsides. Her method of ingestion now *almost* followed the conventional route: throat, gullet, stomach, intestines and bowel – more precisely, a tube from her mouth to her cute little butt. Unfortunately, serious downsides went with this upgrade. Now she had to clean her teeth, visit the bathroom once in a while, and wear underwear.

‘Go on then, I was getting a bit tired of my own company,’ Madeline lied.

The bistro turned out to be a very high-class restaurant. They sat at a table next to a large window overlooking Times Square. To an onlooker, two beautiful people, dining in such a romantic location, implied young lovers about to confirm their love for each other. However, appearances were most definitely deceptive. Madeline shed an inward tear for reasons Roger Bennett would never be allowed to know. This man across the table should be Adam, the one she would always love, but it wasn't. She reluctantly analysed why she had come to be in this unique situation: It all started by being burnt to within an inch of her life. As it happened, this unavoidably led to assassinating three people, accidentally killing one and then supposedly being mistaken for a remarkable autonomous android with attitude. Now suspicion prevailed, what the hell, did this Roger Bennett want?

They were relaxed together and conversation came easy. Copious amounts of expensive wine flowed down Madeline's gullet. Normally this would have made her merry and overly chatty, but now it was just a torment with frequent visits to the bathroom. Perhaps staying sober was a blessing as there were only specific topics she could talk about. Roger seemed to know all about Ray De Par, Tara Gogli and her recent exploits with Osborne. This was slightly alarming but made her feel quite proud of her accomplishments even though she would, of course, continue to deny everything. Wisely, she let Roger do most of the talking, after all, he seemed to be comfortable with the sound of his own voice. So many missions had he been on, so many times had he been shot at, knocked out, drowned and stabbed that it was a miracle that he was still around to tell the tale. Strangely enough, Madeline was enjoying listening to his adventures while she nibbled through an unpronounceable Mexican meal. She imagined the spicy taste as she (Poppy) sucked on the chicken soup through her mouth tube. Naturally, she suspected that most of what he said was utter nonsense, but that small fact would not spoil the evening. Madeline guessed that he was more likely to be a clerk in a government department than a secret agent. However, he could certainly eat for his country if not spy, and that was good enough for the time being. Inevitably he made the crucial mistake of getting on to the subject of his children. This was, for obvious reasons, something that true secret agents avoid like the plague. He had two, Charlotte aged three and Ben aged Six, the result of an unsuccessful marriage but now he was happily divorced. Madeline listened and wondered exactly where he was going with this line of conversation but said nothing.

A message flashed across Madeline's vision.

'Trust no one.'

As usual, ever so brief, ever so impolite. The first time she had heard from him in nearly two weeks and not so much as a 'Hello' or 'be careful' or 'love Turner'.

Madeline continued to listen and eat without as much as a raised eyebrow. She finished off a mouthful and then asked an overdue question, 'Who exactly are you… really?'

Roger faltered with the directness of Madeline's question. He prepared himself to continue with his tales of danger and intrigue but Madeline had another verbal prod at him.

'Come on, you're no more a secret agent than I am a brain surgeon. Who are you, a stalker, a rapist… perhaps a tax inspector?'

'Alright, I suppose I better come clean. I'm a reporter for the Daily Post and Times.'

'A reporter? Oh well, could be worse, I suppose.'

'A bit of a letdown, I know. Look, I'm sorry for the deception but I'm after a scoop.'

'A scoop, with me? Are you sure you've got the right person?'

'Come on, three of the world's most evil men all assassinated in a short space of time and reports of the same young woman at the scenes of all the incidents? You just happen to arrive here today on a coach from Bangor – the location of Osborne's drones. You fit the description and what's more, from inside information, the assassin's name is Mad Bull. You are Maddy Bull are you not? I am right, aren't I? You're the one and only Mad Bull, the hero of the moment, aren't you?'

'For a start, I'm *Madeline* Bull. Sorry to disappoint you but you have the wrong girl. I think you'll find if you've done your research properly, that the Maddy Bull you're referring to is a brunette, she's in all the papers. As a reporter, I assume you do read newspapers?'

'Ah yes but that's exactly what you would do, isn't it? Let's face it, changing your hair colour is pretty easy for someone like yourself.'

'Like myself?' Madeline contested.

'Yes, like yourself… an android!'

Madeline's immediate *reaction* was to stop herself from reacting. Of course, she had to hide the truth even though he was technically wrong. She wasn't an android, she was an automaton, a subtle but important difference. To admit to the truth so soon in this questionable encounter would be asking for trouble.

Madeline decided that the best response to this outrageous suggestion was not to give one and simply refuse to get drawn into the silly discussion. A patronising smile was all he was getting for now.

Clearly, Roger Bennett was desperate for a scoop, especially this particular scoop. In fact, a scoop that featured a beautiful assassin android would, no doubt, be the scoop of the decade. Probably because of his frustration and that he happened to be in the company of the most gorgeous female form he had ever set eyes on, he began to visibly overheat. He had convinced himself that she was an android, made of nothing more than metals and plastics but inevitably, she was seriously turning him on.

'Sorry, I'll have to take this tie off,' said Roger, deviating from his previous flow of conversation.

He did his best to unfasten the throttling black dickey bow around his neck but the more he tried, the tighter it seemed to get. He glanced pathetically towards Madeline for some help.

'Oh, for goodness' sake, come here.'

Madeline struggled for a while. Eventually, she unravelled it, removing the tourniquet from around his neck. While she was doing this, she experienced an unusual feeling in one of her fingers.

One thing Madeline could not do accurately was interpret certain sensations, in this case, pain, caused by a pin in the bowtie, piercing her artificial skin. She immediately noticed a drop of yellow silicone blood oozing from her finger as she pulled the unravelled bowtie from Roger's neck.

'You're bleeding, please let me,' insisted Roger.

He was fully prepared and quickly produced a tissue to wipe her finger but Madeline was already sucking her tiny wound. The curing effect of the silicone liquid quickly took effect, sealing the hole. Within a few seconds, her finger had stopped leaking.

Madeline didn't take kindly to wilful damage to her lovely new body.

'Very clever, that's what you're up to! The meal to see if I can eat and drink because androids supposedly can't do that. A pin carefully concealed in your bowtie and a handy tissue to collect the blood sample. You are pathetic!'

'No, no it isn't… wasn't supposed to…' pleaded Roger.

'Forget it, I thought you were too good to be true. It's time I was leaving anyway.'

‘Please stay, I’m really sorry. Honestly, I don’t know how that pin got there.’

Roger’s pleading was becoming irritating. Feebleness now oozed distastefully out of his mouth where moments ago it could loosely be described as charm. Madeline had something to say before she walked out on him.

‘If you pursue this ridiculous allegation, you can take this as a threat: I know the names of your two children. Get this fixed into your brain, I went to Bangor to visit my Aunty Jennifer and I’m here to do a spot of shopping. Now, pay the bill and don’t bother me again,’ fumed Madeline.

With that, she got up from the table, walked out of the restaurant and hoped never to see Roger Bennett again.

Roger had seen the yellow blood, but so what, who would believe him?

26. Death of a civil servant

Poor pathetic Roger Bennett. On reflection, she was a little tough on him and in hindsight she could have handled it differently. After all, he was very good looking, very charming, and could talk for *England*. She could have gone along with his little game, put up with his tall stories and had a few hours of pleasant company. With the admittance that he was divorced, the evening could have ended with a night of fun and perhaps, far more… Surely, that would have convinced him that she was not an android, despite the yellow blood.

However, her heated last few words did nothing to dissuade him from thinking that she was anything but a cold-hearted android assassin.

Yes… absolutely anything was better than sitting here, all alone, in this dark corner of the lounge of the Black Bull, so weak and desperately hungry.

She gently surfaced from her thoughts and once again became aware of the chatter and laughter from the 'Black Bull' regulars, the noisy one-armed bandit and the distorted music from the pub's obsolete music system.

The truth of the matter was that Roger Bennett worked for an obscure department of the American government. The three thugs originally following her were also from the same department. His timely meeting with Madeline had been carefully staged so that he would draw Madeline into his confidence.

When she first arrived in America, she had been followed by two parties: Osborne's men and these government agents. The latter had gone home with terrible headaches, leaving Osborne's men free to kidnap her, unhindered. Not accepting failure, the American agents tried again. This time they were convinced that they had finally tracked her down even though she was now blonde and had put on a few pounds.

Roger Bennett was simply the best they had. He had to ascertain whether Madeline was actually 'the' Madeline Bull, the incredible android with attitude, or not. The plan was that the blood sample on the tissue was to be tested during the dessert course.

If the blood tested as non-human, she was to be enticed by Bennett into a prearranged hotel room where she would have been incapacitated, terminated and then dismantled.

If the blood tested as human, she was to be enticed by Bennett into a prearranged hotel room for a completely different reason!

The mission had failed dismally. Not only had Madeline given clear indications that she was indeed the one and only feisty android, but she had also walked off without paying for her half of the bill. All in all, this was very frustrating, especially for Roger Bennett.

Without a doubt, it had been a memorable twelve months. A whole year occupying this new body and the same amount of time her real body had occupied the loneliness of the stainless-steel tank. The concept was often emotive, but on the other hand, often quite wonderful. This was because second nature had firmly set in. She had forgotten how to feel any other way. Physically, she felt perfectly normal, she moved faultlessly, spoke perfectly and viewed vividly. Mentally, her attitude and confidence had grown far beyond the old confines of Poppy, the human. True, she was audacious and could kill effortlessly, but these were traits that were encouraged.

However, at this moment in time, there was a serious flaw in her state, namely the food situation…

She hadn't had a proper nutritional intake for almost a month and was now surviving mainly on water. Evidently, no one was caring for her and no one was watching over her anymore. Her vital food supply

desperately needed a bit of maintenance. Somehow, she sensed that she was no longer the goldfish in the bowl. This had its good points, but bad points as well.

Occasionally she would get a morsel of food along the tube if she sucked hard enough but barely enough to keep a beetle alive. She knew if the problem persisted, eventually she would die, but she pushed this fact to the back of her mind.

She hadn't had any contact with Turner for weeks. No new missions, no new people to assassinate, no one telling her what to do. Her peeping Tom had gone. She had a horrible hollow sensation, a feeling of being all alone with only her thoughts to keep her company. Then she realised, that was perfectly normal.

She picked up an abandoned Daily Mail newspaper and half-heartily read some of its contents. Page three had an article about the suspicious death of a top-ranking civil servant in the defence department. His name was Paul Brownsword, but why should she be concerned about him, she had her own problems. Current affairs weren't particularly of any interest to her anymore. Current affairs had got her into this mess in the first place. Her mother wanted her to be a nurse. Why the hell hadn't she listened to her? She threw the paper down on the table narrowly missing her untouched glass of wine. She simply wasn't in the mood to know about other people's problems

By chance, as the paper landed, it opened up on pages four and five. It wasn't until someone went to pick up her paper that she noticed that on page four there was a picture of someone she recognised.

'Finished with it love?'

'No, I bloody haven't!'

'Sorry miss, keep yer shirt on, I was only askin'.'

Madeline had become well known in this mostly unpopulated corner of the pub. It was her seat and her table and people had wisely learnt to give her a wide birth. Often it appeared that she was deep in thought, no one would ever guess that for most of the time she was actually watching television through her own internal system. She had toned down her appearance primarily to keep off unwanted predators. However, it had to be said that with the effects of hunger and boredom she had slightly let herself go.

Inserted at the end of the article about the death of the civil servant in the Defence Department was a familiar picture of a bald, bearded man who Madeline knew simply as Turner. Turner was in fact, Paul

Brownsword. Turner wasn't his real name, of course, it wasn't. Dear Mikael shrewdly pointed out that Turner, along with all the scientists, happened to have the names of famous British artists. She cast her mind back to their short but precious time together and smiled inwardly. She would never forget him or his campervan or his blue dressing gown. In contrast, she didn't have a precious time with Turner, but he was dead now, she had to be respectful. Can't imagine him as a Paul, thought Madeline. She imagined him more as a Cyril or Charles, Paul was far too normal. She read the article with the deepest interest.

"*A body matching the description of the missing civil servant, Paul Brownsword was found in deep undergrowth beside the A18 in Hampshire. He had received two bullet wounds to his chest and most of his clothes had been removed.*

Mr Brownsword who held a top position in the Defence Department suspiciously disappeared five weeks ago. His death is being treated as suspicious although the police have as yet, very little to go on. Detective inspector Stoddard who is leading the investigation said, 'All signs point to a highly organised assassination.' Mr Brownsword had an unenviable position in a particular government department where many enemies were unavoidably made especially amongst world criminal organisations. He left a wife and four grown-up children. He had a love for contemporary English art and his collection of original paintings was extensive."

'What the hell am I going to do now?' she blurted out.

'Buy us all a round!' came a reply from someone in the pub.

All was now blatantly clear. It explained why she was chronically hungry. It also explained why she hadn't had any new instructions for weeks. Clearly, he was the only one running the show. He had taken it upon himself to look after her real body, watch her movements on the big monitor screen and decide who was to be the subject of her next mission.

'Surely, he had to have a stand-in? Turner couldn't possibly look after me all on his own.' she mumbled, now quietly to herself.

But he had. His words to the team were precise, *'…Let me be clear about this, only we in this room are to know about this procedure. As far as anyone else is concerned, Mad Bull is and always will be autonomous.'*

The upshot of this was that Madeline was considered to be nothing more than a machine, driven by a cleverly programmed computer inside *it*. Therefore, *it* didn't require any looking after. *It* just required instructions from time to time. Without instructions, *it* would simply become inactive. With Turner, the project leader, dead, senior figures

in government, including M5,6,7,8 and the military, would wash their hands of the whole affair. Madeline Bull was now at best on her own and forgotten about, at worst would be hunted down, captured and crushed into a small cube in an untidy scrapyard somewhere up north.

'The scientists, what about them? Surely, they must still be concerned for my wellbeing,' she thought, but then reality dawned, they had all returned to their own family circles and humdrum lives. To them, the Mad Bull project was a thing of the past and something never to talk about.

She remembered Turner's last abrupt message, ***'Trust no one'.*** The significance of this short bit of advice was now abundantly clear, but the implications went deeper, deeper than she could possibly imagine.

27. Reacquaintance

She had to come up with a plan. This she did in an instant, mainly because this was the perfect excuse she was looking for. There was nothing else for it, no other way, at least none that she would consider. She had to contact Adam. Sod the strict conditions and annoying protocols that she was supposed to adhere to with her new body. After all, there was no Turner anymore to stop her and who better than Adam to share her troubles with?

The real reason why Madeline spent most evenings in this shabby public house was because it was here where Poppy and Adam spent many wonderful evenings. Here they participated in the pub quizzes, played darts and drank the warm larger and corked wine. It was, used to be, Adam's local, so she hoped that she would see him, not communicate with, but just see him and that would comfort her. Sadly, all the weeks that she had been stalking the Black Bull, occupying this quiet lonely corner of the lounge, he hadn't so much as poked his head through the door.

Although her new body was perfect, strong, efficient, agile and mostly indestructible, to see her moving and walking, no one would ever think so. The debilitating factor was that her real body, Poppy, was so weakened with hunger that even the smallest movement was an effort. Consequently, this debility was imparted to her android body. Walking any distance was out of the question, she hadn't even enough energy to safely drive her pretty little Mini Cooper, therefore, taxis were now the only practical form of transport.

The thought of seeing Adam again brought on a new spurt of energy. She felt better, much more enthusiastic. She knew it couldn't last, though. Before she could face Adam, she had to tidy herself up considerably. A much-needed bath was first on the list. For weeks, she had purposely been dressing down to ward off unwanted attention, but now she could go back to her old ways. A pretty patterned short dress was selected and her new blonde hair was conditioned and allowed to flow down her back once more. For too long it had been tied up in a bun and neglected. Finally, a quick charge wouldn't go amiss. She plugged herself into a thirteen-amp socket.

Adam's flat was a mere three miles from Madeline's flat. After a short

taxi ride, she found herself apprehensively standing outside his doorway. It was a doorway that looked just like all the others down the street, but she would never forget this particular one, it had the number 69 on it. It was a number that was hard to forget. Only once had she stood at this door before, it was when they first met, she remembered it well. She was a local news reporter just starting in her career. It happened to be a particularly bland topic about the untidiness of wheelie bins in the streets and Adam was chosen for his opinion. It was almost love at first sight and the rest is history. After that they only ever met at halfway points, Brighton or London for convenience, never at this door again. Madeline's real heart fluttered as too many negatives filled her mind: Did he still live here? Would he be alone? Had he married someone else? Whether he was in or not, was the first hurdle. She tentatively tapped on the door. After a few heart-stopping moments, she heard the sounds of bolts and chains being carefully removed. Unfortunately, things rarely go to plan and this occasion was certainly no exception. A young, attractive woman appeared as the door swung open. Madeline could have walked away then and there, completely out of Adam's life forever. That's what she was always supposed to do. After all, Adam thought his Poppy was dead and buried. Why shouldn't he have got on with his life, found someone else, got married and had kids? Surely, it's what Poppy would have wanted. Bullshit! It wasn't what Madeline wanted at all. She wasn't going to give up that easily. She decided to stay and face her nemesis.

'Sorry to bother you, is Adam in by any chance?' Madeline asked, nervously.

It was unusual for Madeline's voice to tremble. She realised that doing this was more nerve-racking than any assassination mission or any disassembling she had had the misfortune to endure. The attractive female who greeted her had not been anticipated, therefore, any conversation she had rehearsed completely dissolved away.

'Yes, he's just in the shower. Would you like to come in and wait?'

'Er, no it's OK, I'll come back later,' said Madeline, hating herself for being so uncharacteristically feeble and submissive.

'Are you sure, he won't be a minute?'

'No, no, I'll come back later…'

Fortunately, this courteous toing and froing of the conversation had consumed enough time to allow Adam to finish his shower and emerge at the top of the stairs. Madeline heard his wonderful voice for the first time in over twelve months.

‘Who is it, Jenny?’

‘Someone to see you… Sorry, I forgot to ask you your name?’

‘Madeline, Madeline Bull.’

‘Mrs, miss or Ms?’ asked Adam jovially as he launched himself down the stairs.

His voice got closer and closer until finally Madeline’s and Adam’s eyes met. Madeline found it hard to speak so she didn’t. Apart from the goatee beard, a ponytail and a slightly rounder paunch, he hadn’t altered one little bit. Madeline couldn’t allow herself to be overcome with emotion. She knew she had to put on a brave front, be everything that Poppy wasn’t and Madeline was, but it was truly hard. She wanted to hold him, kiss him, squeeze him and… other things, but just looking at him would have to suffice for now. He smiled alluringly at her but he was only human, that couldn’t be held detrimental to his character. Madeline knew everything about this man standing in front of her and Adam knew everything about this attractive woman in front of him. An important difference though, Madeline was aware of this, but Adam wasn’t. This was the most surreal experience of Madeline’s life. She hoped it didn’t show.

‘Oh, hello, can I help you?’ asked Adam cheerily.

This was simply too much for her to bear, Adam was happy. Why was he so bloody happy? Madeline was monumentally sad but she knew why. She was weak, her spirits were low and Adam had a new girlfriend, so she cried inconsolably.

Crying in that particular way used every bit of energy she had left, causing her to collapse in a heap on Adam’s doorstep. She was blissfully aware of him carrying her to the sofa. It wasn’t far but every moment of him holding her in his arms was heaven.

Even though her new existence was thanks to the miracles of science: Touch sensors in her artificial skin, a revolutionary radio communication sending these electrical impulses through the air and her real nerves sensing these signals, she recognised the warmth and firmness of his hands touching her skin. *How could this be?*

Jenny and Adam stood over her. Jenny enthusiastically took over the job of consoling her, wiping her tears and making her comfortable. Madeline had no choice but to endure this overbearing nurse, this Jenny, whoever she was. However, she was the wrong person and way too tactile for Madeline’s liking. After a few minutes, Madeline’s strength had recovered slightly, just enough to pretend that the tears hadn’t happened and to put a smile on her pretty face.

‘This is so embarrassing. I feel such a fool… time I wasn’t here.’

‘No, you clearly came here for a purpose so you’d better tell me or I’ll have to keep on interrogating you all evening until you do,’ insisted Adam.

Adam hadn’t changed one bit. He had his own wonderful masterful way of persuasion that used to make Poppy do as she was told. She hoped, now as Madeline, that she still had this weakness.

Jenny quickly produced a cup of hot sweet tea and then apologised, ‘Sorry I’ve got to go or I’ll be late. Nice to meet you, Madeline. Hope you’re feeling okay now. See you again sometime.’

Within seconds she was out of the front door and gone, leaving Adam and Madeline on their own. Madeline was naturally puzzled by this remarkable degree of trust. Either Madeline wasn’t considered a threat or Jenny was unbelievably naïve and for some unfathomable reason had complete faith in Adam.

‘So, what’s all this about?’ asked Adam eagerly.

Madeline wasn’t ready to move forward until a minor detail was cleared up first.

‘Lovely girl, Jenny?’

‘Er, yes, I suppose she is.’

‘Known her long?’ Madeline knew this question was overly inquisitive but she asked it anyway.

‘About six months, if you must know.’

‘Sorry it’s just that she must be very trusting, most women stick to their men like leeches when I’m around.’

‘I see where you’re going. If you must know, she shares the house with me, and if it helps, she thought you were gorgeous too, especially when she was wiping your tears. OK? Have we cleared that up?’

‘You mean she’s…?’

‘Yes, and frustratingly, she has some stunning friends.’

Madeline allowed a genuine smile to light up her beautifully designed face. The black clouds of apprehension and doubt drifted away. One hurdle over, now on to the next; Madeline prepared herself to tell her tale. A real automaton would now have to go into ‘lie mode’, however, Madeline wasn’t autonomous so she could call it simply a deviation from the truth.

‘The reason I’m here is because I once had a very close friend… Her

name was Poppy Cock.'

Whatever distracting influences happened to be going on in Adam's mind, they now ended abruptly. He was not aware that his dear departed Poppy had a friend called Madeline Bull although there was no reason to think that she didn't.

'She said that if I ever needed someone I could trust implicitly, I could always call on you.'

'When did she say this then?' asked Adam suspiciously.

'Just before she went to Africa. Look I know how this appears. Twelve months go by and I suddenly knock on your door; you have a right to be suspicious. Ask me anything about her if you don't trust me, something that only her best friend would know.'

Adam didn't want to go to this extreme. He had no reason not to trust this strange visitor but he did have a question which would prove things once and for all.

'OK, if you insist, what was her most treasured possession?'

'Well, discounting you, I suppose it was my… *her* little pink mobile phone.'

She passed the test; how could she fail? The next stage was to engage Adam's complete attention so she chose a powerful opener,

'I work… used to work for Paul Brownsword.'

'What, the murdered civil servant?' Adam was clearly intrigued.

'Correct, I had the unenviable task of carrying out certain missions for him and not getting very well paid.'

She would have liked to have said killing people and not being paid at all but obviously that would have been inappropriate.

'Missions? You're a sort of secret agent, then?' asked Adam, doubtfully.

After the Roger Bennett affair, she didn't particularly want to go down this route and endure James Bond taunts so she ignored his comment and continued with her story. Up to this point, it has to be said that she had been fairly accurate. Now, Madeline had to concoct a tale that considerably deviated from the truth.

'The thing is,' Madeline explained, 'he operated from a secret underground base – him and his assistant. Officially this base doesn't exist and I can't trust the people who know it exists. Are you following me up to now?

‘Yes, yes, carry on!’

‘As you know, Brownsword was assassinated and I suspect that his assistant may also be in danger if not already dead. I need help. I can’t get into the base on my own and I don’t know who to trust, that’s why I’ve come to you.’

‘You’re saying, Paul Brownsword was killed by someone on the inside?’

‘It looks like it. I daren’t go to the police, not until I know who I can trust… or I could end up next on the list of dead people.’

Madeline was fairly pleased with herself. She hadn’t lied excessively, just perhaps fringing on exaggeration. Adam didn’t have to think too deeply, he had no plans for the next few hours so he went and got his coat.

‘Come on then, let’s go!’ said Adam eagerly.

‘You mean you believe my incredible story and you’ve only known me a few minutes?’

‘My schedule is empty, the night is young and you’re gorgeous company. I’d be an idiot to turn an adventure like this down,’ said Adam with a beaming smile.

It was a mere twenty miles to the underground base or ‘the lab’ as Madeline knew it. Madeline’s sense of direction had never been particularly remarkable and her navigation skills could be described as rudimentary, but this was one place she would always be able to find. It was her *real* home, probably always would be, where her food supply had dried up and where she was dying of starvation. During the trip, Madeline became weaker and weaker until she reached the point where she could barely move, but she knew she had to hide this frailty from Adam as best as she could. Adam, on the other hand, trembled and fidgeted with anticipation and trepidation of what he was about to discover. He convinced himself that he was on a government secret mission or at least the closest he would probably ever get to one. Thoughts were churning in his mind, too. Apparently, the girl of his dreams who died twelve months ago had a close friend who she never mentioned. This close friend turns out to be a stunningly beautiful secret agent who desperately needs help. How convenient, how questionable, how bizarre?

However, the actual truth was more bizarre than he could possibly have imagined. Poppy didn’t die twelve months ago and didn’t have a close friend called Madeline because Poppy and Madeline are one and the same. She knew, eventually, she would have some awkward

explaining to do, but for now, Madeline let Adam believe that he was her knight in shining armour. She wondered if she had done the right thing. Perhaps she should have come straight out with it and told Adam the real truth – who she really was. That would never have worked, though. He most certainly wouldn't have believed her, accused her of being crazy and thrown her out. That would have been difficult to recover from. No, this was by far the best way. Once in the lab, he would discover the truth and as far as Madeline was concerned, that moment couldn't come quick enough.

It was almost like old times but Adam certainly didn't know it. Madeline should have enjoyed the drive, next to the one she loved, but under the present circumstances, she couldn't. She was fighting to keep herself conscious and her new body activated. He still had the same old faithful car, the ageing Volvo estate. She had sat in the very same seat several times before but as an entirely different person. Then she was so happy, so carefree and so normal. Now she wasn't normal – not in the slightest.

The familiar office block building finally came into view. Madeline immediately noticed one or two subtle changes around the entrance area. There was a new logo on the door, *Cisco Medicines* and the entrance had been smartened up with an abundance of ground shrubbery. Madeline remembered that there used to be a prosthetics company occupying the first floor which unknowingly worked hand in hand with the 'Madeline Bull' project. Now with the project ending, evidently, they had been forced to relocate. 'This could be bad,' she thought. A wave of anxiety flooded through both sets of Madeline's veins. Did the building now have new owners and if so, were they aware of the mysteries contained in their basement? Even worse, had the new owners explored the basement and found the secrets contained within? Could *they* have inadvertently turned off her food and drink supply? She was semi-aware that her hunger was causing her thoughts to ramble; she had to pull herself together. Adam parked right outside the entrance and eagerly jumped out of the car. Madeline didn't, almost collapsing on the hard pavement, but she hastily composed herself as best she could with what energy she had left.

They both studied the multi-storey office building. It looked fairly humdrum with office furniture and fittings visible through many of the windows. The ambient street lighting below gave the drab building an eerie orange hue.

Presumably, during the day, there wouldn't have been a problem entering the building as the automatic doors would have opened at the hint of any outside movement. However, now the doors were

firmly locked as it was late evening and everyone had gone home.

‘The base is down in the basement… well, it used to be. It’s accessed by pressing the right sequence of buttons in the lift,’ explained Madeline, her voice getting weaker by the second.

‘Very cloak and dagger-ish,’ said Adam.

Despite his enthusiasm, he was beginning to have serious concerns about his new gorgeous companion. He had already associated Madeline’s weak and lethargic state with some kind of drug dependency and now they were conveniently standing outside a medical supplies building.

‘So, now what do we do?’ fretted Madeline.

‘Well, we could always break in?’

‘It’ll be alarmed, probably straight to the police!’

‘Don’t worry, we don’t have to break any glass, look, there’s a keypad on the door,’ said Adam smugly.

‘Yes, so? You just happen to know the code?’

‘I design door entry systems for a living. If it’s the *Bradwell 4 series*, which I’m pretty sure it is, I had a hand in designing it and know the engineering codes.’

Madeline recalled that he was some kind of engineer. She never really paid any attention to exactly what sort. Poppy’s glamorous, exciting and adventurous profession always put his occupation in the shade. Shamefully, at that time, she was blissfully unaware of her shallowness, but now these recollections stung heavily. Madeline had to continue the pretence of knowing nothing about Adam to maintain the deception.

‘Poppy was right, you are a handy person to know,’ said Madeline, forcing her weak words out.

‘Anything with a keypad or code panel will always have an engineering code, even though the makers often flatly deny it. Ever wondered how locksmiths miraculously seem to gain entry without breaking anything?’

Adam keyed in the first eight digits of the engineering code, waited ten seconds and then keyed in the final eight digits. After exactly another ten seconds, the lock on the door energised with a welcoming buzz. They cautiously entered through the glass doors into the foyer area where they found two lifts, an ascending staircase and a deserted reception area. It was at this point that Madeline suddenly collapsed

without warning, she was dying of hunger, but it was the last thing Adam suspected. Over the past few days, she had come to respect people who go on hunger strikes, it was not a pleasant experience.

'Madeline! Madeline, are you alright?'

Madeline's body was motionless but she still managed to say a few words.

'Adam, I need to tell you something… I don't think I'm going to make it. It's all down to you now. Press buttons 1 and 9 for three seconds… Poppy loves you and is… looking…'

With that, Madeline Bull ceased to function and went into sleep mode. Poppy was no longer producing enough electrical activity to activate her system and operate the Madeline android body so it misinterpreted her life signs as sleep.

'Madeline, wake up!' shouted Adam, but it was no use.

Poppy could still hear him clearly but she hadn't enough energy to wake up the system. Adam was on his own and was now seriously beginning to wish he'd been rude and turned her away when he had the chance. He put her last few words down to a tease and an unkind one at that. Poppy was dead, he went to her funeral.

Now driven by intrigue and curiosity, he had little choice but to carry on and go through with the undertaking, hoping he would find some answers. In particular: what exactly was he getting himself involved in? What was wrong with his beautiful new acquaintance and what would he find in the building basement? He'd come too far now to turn back. He pressed buttons 1 and 9 for three seconds and the lift responded by descending beyond any of the indicated floor levels. It shortly came to rest with a creak and a shudder. The lift door slid open to reveal an eerily dark and dusty corridor before him. The only illumination was provided by the interior lift light, casting a long ghoulish shadow of Adam with Madeline on his shoulder, into the blackness of the corridor. Once his eyes had adjusted, he could just about make out a double door at the far end. He proceeded boldly into the bleak unknown. He was too preoccupied with balancing Madeline's heavy weight on his bony shoulder to find a light switch. She was unnaturally limp and deceptively heavy, but nothing close to the truth registered with him. However, he did notice that the feel of her body was somewhat unusual.

Faint slithers of light and an irritating wailing sound seeped through the gaps around the double door. The pitch of the wailing sound steadily increased as Adam warily approached the entrance to Madeline's real home – the lab. Adam was now presented with

another keypad on one of the double doors. He instantly recognised the make, knew the six-digit engineering code and entered it. Fortunately, he knew nothing about the deterrent. If he had been unsuccessful with the code, he would have been automatically and mercilessly gassed in the corridor.

He took a deep breath and entered. The only light in the room was coming from a large monitor screen on the far wall, displaying strange blurry patterns. Naturally, Brownsword's endangered assistant was nowhere to be seen. However, Madeline's little deception had been successful, she had achieved her goal. Adam wasn't particularly surprised that no one was there. He tried to lower Madeline carefully onto a chair but unfortunately, she slid out of his hands and landed in a twisted heap on the floor. It was while he was straightening her out that he noticed something familiar and completely bizarre. Amidst the faint flickering colours and shapes on the monitor, he recognised himself, out of focus and pixelated but unmistakably it was an enormous picture of himself. The wailing sound was now at a deafening pitch, severely clouding his judgement. In desperation, he searched for a light switch, found one and clicked it. Countless fluorescent lights buzzed into action revealing the room that Madeline, but not Adam, was so familiar with. With the increased light level, Adam's picture became much brighter and clearer. The large wall-mounted monitor was precisely relaying Madeline's eyesight.

It didn't take long for Adam to make a completely false assumption and assumed Madeline had a covert miniature video camera about her person. This would account for the wailing sound which was audio feedback caused by the camera's microphone being too close to the monitor's loudspeaker. Adam turned the sound down on the monitor.

He could now think a bit more clearly but no amount of thinking would ever prepare him for the reality of the situation. Madeline sensed all the events unfolding but being incapable of activating her body, all she could do was hope that Adam would put two and two together and figure it all out. However, this was very unlikely. The truth of the matter was altogether beyond any conclusion Adam was likely to come to. Madeline didn't have a video camera on her person, it was her own android eyes and ears relaying her sight and hearing to the large screen. Understandably, the covert camera theory somewhere about Madeline's person seemed a good enough explanation for Adam.

'Come on Adam, look around, you're clever enough… Think!' said Poppy out loud, inside her tank.

Poppy desperately needed food, anything to raise her energy levels enough to regain control of her Madeline Bull host. She went through her food menus but nothing so much as a crumb came down her food tube. Drinks were OK and on tap but there was no calorific content in what was available. Then she had a brainwave.

'Toothpaste must have some kind of food content and there's no shortage of that! If nothing else it will be good for my teeth,' she thought.

She promptly chomped her way through several tubes' worth of the gooey, minty paste.

Adam had to accept that Madeline was indeed a secret agent. She had been fairly truthful to him although there were certain aspects of her story that didn't ring true. Where was this missing assistant in peril, for instance? This elusive person was, after all, the whole point of him helping Madeline. Adam decided to make himself useful and have a good look around. He briefly searched the two rooms which were off the main laboratory but they were empty. He searched objects in the room that were big enough to fit any alive or dead assistants in but he found nothing of any significance. All he did find was a crumpled sheet of paper at the back of a drawer. The paper was headed, '*The Madeline Bull Project*' followed by a simple shopping list for milk and a loaf of bread. Adam looked at Madeline Bull lying motionless on the floor. Why, the hell, was she a project? This didn't make sense, he needed some answers. He went over to Madeline and tried to wake her but she was still deep in her slumber, locked fast in her sleep mode. There was nothing else for it, he would have to load her back on his shoulder and return to the lift. Fortunately, moments later, this course of action became unnecessary, wholly because Madeline had suddenly burst into life.

'God, that was unpleasant, I don't think I'm ever going to clean my teeth again,' complained Madeline out loud, then she realised she was awake and somehow standing. 'Oh, hello, have I missed anything?'

'What the hell, is going on here!?' asked Adam firmly.

'Adam… Adam, haven't you worked it out yet?'

'Madeline, stop playing games, why have you brought me here? There's no sign of a missing assistant. There's certainly no one here in peril.'

Adam did his best to keep calm.

Madeline was about to say, 'Oh yes there is, right there in that tank', but the area where she was going to point to was just bare empty floor

space.

‘Where the hell am I?’ she screamed.

‘Madeline, calm down! You’re in the secret basement, the basement where you asked me to bring you, remember?’ said Adam serenely, suspecting she was having some kind of a drug-related breakdown.

‘I know where here is and I am bloody calm, but you… you haven’t a clue what’s going on have you?’

‘I think I have. I think there’s a strong possibility that you are drug-dependent and, this is just a guess, you are going through withdrawal. That’s probably why we’re in the basement of a pharmaceutical company,’ suggested Adam in a patronising tone.

‘Don’t be bloody stupid! Adam, look at that screen!’

‘Yes, I know, you’re wearing a covert camera somewhere,’

‘As if? No, look!’ insisted Madeline. She blinked both eyes a few times and the plasma screen alternated from all grey to her view, a few times.

‘But, but your eyes? It’s your eyes!’ said Adam in disbelief.

‘Yes, it’s my eyes because I’m a fucking android!’ said Madeline in frustration.

‘Oh, come on, this is getting ridiculous.’

‘A little more proof? look!’

Madeline, not for the first time, displayed her syringe finger; it was the most easily accessible part of her non-human construction. She could have shown him her inflatable breasts or even fired her newly acquired laser weapon, however, the sight of her hinged fingertip seemed to be enough to make him sit down and take stock of this surreal situation.

Adam was a technically minded guy. It was the twenty-first century and he knew such things were theoretically possible. He had read the books, listened to the lectures and watched the YouTube videos about androids, but he was not prepared to have one standing in front of him. After a bewildering few moments, he quickly regained his foothold on normality and put the ‘trick with her fingers’ down to a bit of conjuring. He was sure he’d seen Penn and Teller do the same trick. The eyesight was easy to explain; a concealed switch being operated in time to her blinking. One thing Adam was not, was gullible, stupid maybe, but never easy to fool. Goodness knows why this woman wanted him to think she was an android was beyond him.

He had to hand it to her, she was clearly deranged but very convincing.

‘Madeline, think about it… The drugs are making you delusional. You are a beautiful human being, certainly not an android. It’s all in your imagination,’ said Adam.

‘Adam, you twerp, think a little deeper. Of course, I’m human and I resent the delusional bit… I have to spell it out for you, don’t I?

‘Madeline, I think you need some help.’

‘This body is mechanical but it’s controlled by a human, a certain young disfigured woman who is supposed to be in a suspension tank behind you. That’s what I meant when I said, where am I?’ explained Madeline.

Adam clapped his hands in a complimentary way.

‘Brilliant performance, crazy but definitely brilliant!’

The moment was long overdue.

Adam had to know now, no matter what his reaction would be.

Madeline took a deep breath and calmly and clearly spelt it out,

‘Adam… I’m Poppy.’

His reaction was predictable. He had patiently tolerated her ridiculous rantings, but now she had gone too far. To say she was Poppy was distasteful, insensitive and completely disrespectful. It was high time he turned his back on this whole affair and left. Adam would always try to help a damsel in distress, but this Madeline Bull woman was unfairly taking advantage of Adam’s good nature. She was now messing around with his most sacred, innermost feelings. He shook his head and walked towards the door.

‘Adam, listen, please! Sometimes in life, you have to believe the unbelievable. You have to trust in the face of your misgivings. They gave me a choice, exist in a horribly disfigured, burnt and ruined body or… living like this. No more Poppy, hello Madeline Bull.’

Adam hesitated at the doorway, despite the implausibility, he needed to hear more.

‘They put me in a tank and connected thousands of wires to my feeble body so that I can remotely control this machine called Madeline Bull.’

‘No! No! Poppy’s dead, I went to her funeral.’

‘I know you did, it was televised. You were there at the back, I saw

you, they panned in on you between those fat celebs, you didn't cry. Adam, why did you hide your tears? Why did you leave it so long to visit me in hospital? You wanted to, but you read those Home and Beauty magazines instead, didn't you? Adam, my love, you are all I have, all I've ever wanted. I want to go back, right now, to the Embankment and that little red box… You on your knee, in that puddle.'

Adam slowly turned around and silently stared into Madeline's eyes. The stare seemed to last forever. He relived those moments that Madeline had brought vividly to his attention. He remembered the hours he waited outside her hospital room, too afraid to go in because he was immersed in self-pity and selfish fear. He remembered how he was squashed between those two celebrities at her funeral. How his tears were all used up long before the service. He recollected the puddle and his wet trousers when he proposed to her. He knew Madeline was saying all the right things. She was more than convincing and he was more than stubborn. He knew he could put everything right by saying just one word to her, so he did.

'Poppy?'

'Yep! It's me!'

'But you're gorgeous?'

'And why shouldn't I be? I wouldn't let them put me in an ugly robot!'

'My… Poppy?

'Yes Adam, your Poppy. You can hold me if you want, I know I'm silicone and stuff but it's me deep inside.'

Adam was completely bewildered, shocked and trembling. Tears welled in his eyes and then overflowed. His beloved Poppy, incredible as it seemed, had adopted a new form and was here with him. She wasn't dead. Eventually, he would ask her a thousand questions and get accustomed to her completely new looks but he knew these things couldn't be rushed. One positive step at a time would be the best way forward.

Madeline had outgrown Poppy in many ways. In some respects, she was different, certainly not in a bad way but Adam was different too. The experience of losing Poppy had taken its toll on him. His new goatee beard failed to hide the lines of sadness on his face. He had aged considerably in the last year and put on a moderate amount of weight. It was an understatement to say that he had missed her. Countless people mourned Poppy. Many said she would be sorely missed, many said they adored her and many even said they loved

her, but what did they know? For Adam, it was truly unconditional love. He had no choice but to try and get on with his life, try to start again, try to love someone else and try to forget Poppy. Far too many challenges. He knew he couldn't possibly love anyone else like he loved Poppy. He missed holding her, missed talking to her but above all, he missed her being alive.

'You can try these lips if you want, they work the same way… and they're warm.'

So, he did.

For the scientists to install touch sensors on every square centimetre of Madeline's android skin was simply not feasible. There were parts of her body where only a very few were necessary, like most of her back for instance. However, the team who built her were obviously considerate. Madeline had previously discovered that skin sensors were in all the correct and necessary places for what was to come. She felt the warmth of Adam's lips on hers, his arms pulling her in tight and above all, his love for her. For Adam, these were clearly not Poppy's lips he was kissing or her body he was embracing, but just as good – he *would* get used to it. It had been speed dating to the extreme and as Poppy was inside somewhere, he was comfortable with it.

Finally, they were together. Such a lot had happened since they were last in each other's arms: Poppy had died and then become an android and then killed lots of people. Adam, on the other hand, hadn't killed anybody at all, grown a beard and had for some reason, taken in a pretty gay lodger. First and foremost, though, he had done his best to put Poppy out of his mind but failed completely. Madeline glanced at his watery eyes and sensed Adam faintly trembling with contained joy. She, on the other hand, had hardened and learnt to put such emotions to one side. Madeline wanted to sob until there were puddles, but she could do that later when she wasn't in such a weak and troubled state. Naturally, they both were in a hurry to make up for the last twelve months but the cold empty lab was not the right place.

'It was *you* who worked for Brownsword then? And I suppose *you're* this elusive assistant we've come here to rescue?'

Adam decided to put a few facts together and throw a question or two at her.

'It was the deal. I get a new life, a wonderful new body and work for the British government… and Poppy dies.'

'What exactly do… did you do for the British Government?'

‘Later…’

It was far too soon for Madeline to confess to her true vocation – essentially an assassin. This truth would no doubt unfold in due course but for now, there was a more concerning matter to fret about.

‘More to the point, what the hell have they done with my body?’

‘Do you know how weird that sounds? Surely, it can’t have gone far.’

‘Adam, I’m starving. My food supply has dried up and I’ve eaten almost nothing, apart from toothpaste, for over three weeks, that’s why I passed out.’

‘Let me get this straight, your real Poppy body that controls your Madeline body, which should be here but is… misplaced, isn’t getting any nourishment. That’s the reason why your Madeline body went to sleep. Presumably, a default mode when you’re too weak to move your Poppy body.’

‘Exactly!’

‘All pretty obvious really,’ said Adam sarcastically. ‘And to think I thought you were on drugs!’

‘Such an easy mistake to make,’ said Madeline cynically.

‘Right, leave it to me, I’m good at tracing wires.’

Madeline inwardly despaired as Adam delicately detached himself from their embrace.

‘Wires?’ asked Madeline.

‘Yes, well, cables to be more precise. That monitor, it’s your eyesight, right? So, all I’ve got to do is follow the cables from it. You can’t be far away.’

‘Adam, it might not be that straightforward. I have this special radio system that links me to this me. I could be on the other side of the planet for all I know.’

‘Not the Braugenhau transmitter?’ Adam queried.

‘You’ve heard of it?’ said Madeline, surprised.

‘I read about the concept in one of my journals. Not just a pretty face you know. Looks like they’ve perfected it then, incredible!’

Madeline was quickly gelling back with her old love but for Adam, it was a different matter. He had a mountain to climb before he could fully accept the situation. For a start, Madeline looked nothing like Poppy. He did and always would love Poppy but he had not yet,

strictly speaking, fallen in love with Poppy's new overcoat – the android. He was completely satisfied that Poppy was deep inside her, controlling her but Madeline Bull was different, was so cute, so sexy and so perfect. Any red-blooded man couldn't help but flirt with her, lust after her and willingly jeopardise the most stable of all marriages.

Poppy was never overweight (certainly not now) but she had little surpluses, that's what Adam liked to call them. Madeline however, was not built with surpluses. Her figure was designed to put even a Barbie Doll to shame. There was an important reason for this: her seductiveness was purposely intended to be one of her most effective weapons. Adam certainly would not be immune, would not *want* to be immune and may well succumb to her magnetism. He was only human, after all.

Madeline's personality had also undergone subtle changes from Poppy's. Both were confident and self-assured but Madeline had an audacious edge. An edge forged from suffering, loneliness and killing. She knew she had become different from his Poppy. Now she had found her Adam, she would surely revert, but Rome wasn't built in a day.

'I don't think you're all that far away. Surely you would have felt it if they had moved you any significant distance?' suggested Adam.

'I suppose they could have moved me in my sleep? Anything's possible.'

Madeline knew there were times when she could sleep through absolutely anything.

'Don't you know anyone who you can ask?'

'I did until I realised that they were all named after famous English painters to protect their anonymity.'

Adam was now on a mission of his own. He put himself in the shoes of the designers of Madeline Bull and asked himself what he would do to safeguard the project. The core elements of the project, namely Poppy in her tank, the interface, the computer and the transmitter would all have to be permanently hidden. That would be a mammoth task and entail an unprecedented amount of security. An idea flashed into his mind; far better to leave everything put and simply *hide the room*.

He put it to Madeline, 'Just suppose for a moment that actually, you haven't moved a single inch.'

'Well, put it like this, I'm definitely not here!' said Madeline tersely.

'You're not here because I don't think this is the room. This has to be a

mock-up!'

'A room double!' Madeline exclaimed.

She instantly knew what he was getting at. It was a good time for her to pull Adam back to her lips and give him a grateful kiss.

It was the only logical solution, two basement floors. One was a decoy and the other was where Poppy resided in her tank. A clever deception to convince anyone associated with the project that Poppy had been moved to a new secret location. However, there was a serious problem with this elaborate misdirection. It seems only one person knew the specific lift code to the real basement floor and he was now dead.

This probably contributed to why Poppy was starving to death. There was nobody alive who knew where she was, or how to get to her.

Adam quickly established that the monitor cables went downwards into the floor. It seemed to indicate that the real room was beneath them.

They left the decoy room, negotiated the long dark corridor and summoned the lift. To get to the other basement room, hopefully, the one with Poppy within, the lift had to take them even further downwards. Adam tried some obvious combinations like 1 and 10 for nine seconds, 1 and 8 for nine seconds, 1 and 10 for ten seconds and then some even more obscure combinations. Suddenly the lift prepared itself to move and Adam's smug expression lasted for almost a second before he realised the lift was ascending. The lift came to rest on the ground floor and opened its doors to a grumpy night watchman called Sid.

They weren't to know that five minutes earlier, the night watchman had come on duty. They didn't even know that the building had such a thing as a night watchman. They didn't know his name was Sid either. If they had done, life would have been so much easier at this point. If they had known enough to say, 'Hi Sid, how's your new granddaughter?' he would have made them a cup of tea before sending them on their merry way. Unfortunately, they were unprepared for his unexpected presence and he was likewise.

'A bit late leaving, Sir, Madam, can I see your building passes please.'

Of course, neither Adam nor Madeline possessed anything that would remotely look like a pass. All credit to Sid, he suspected this. He had thirty years of experience as a watchman to thank for his razor-sharp intuition.

'Passes please… One press on this button,' he referred to a device

hanging around his neck, ‘and the police will be here in a couple of minutes… I don’t want any trouble.’

Thirty years as a night watchman, all alone, during the hours of the night when he should have been cuddled up to his wife, had made Sid very unforgiving and grumpy. To be fair, Sid was simply doing his job but Madeline had no time for this dedication to duty, she didn’t know how long the calorific content of the toothpaste (if, indeed there was any) was going to last.

She wiggled her mole and then whispered to Adam, ‘Take a deep breath and don’t breathe in until I tell you to… oh, and excuse me!’

Exactly why Madeline had said ‘excuse me’ was made very clear a few seconds later. Sid was about to find out the potency of her notorious farts. Almost immediately there was an unconscious night watchman sprawled out on the hard, cold marble floor. Adam firmly held his breath as they ran towards the exit door. He’d noted the consequence of breathing in. The door refused to open, it had no handy keypad or bolts and locks. Eventually, Madeline spotted a box on the wall with a big red button on it, marked “Open”. It was probably no more than forty seconds before Adam took a lung full of cool fresh outside air, however, when he related this story to his future grandchildren it would be well over five minutes.

‘Full of surprises, aren’t I?’ chirped Madeline.

‘Full of something! What the hell, was that?’ asked Adam, still catching his breath.

‘I don’t know but it comes in a little bottle which I empty into my belly button.’

Someone asked the question, most probably a child, 'Mummy, why does my botty sometimes make a trumpy noise?'

Slightly taken by surprise, the grown-up replied, 'It's perfectly normal. It's nature's way of warning other people that you have made a stinky.'

The child was disturbed, 'Is this something my botty will always do?'

'Of course not,' replied the grown-up, 'Eventually, with practice, you will learn to fart in silence and then you can blame it on the dog.'

As Madeline was too weak to be her usual confident, commanding self, it was up to Adam to take charge. This he did by searching for something that resembled a vent pipe or an emergency exit. He had noticed that the basement lacked stairway access. Because of this omission, despite the secrecy, building regulations would have insisted on the provision of an alternative escape route in case the lifts were ever to fail.

Eventually, Adam found a shaft, a square solid brick structure, a good fifteen metres away from the entrance. It was situated on a piece of land, almost completely hidden by mature bushes. On one side of it, there was a rusty ventilation panel held on with four rusty bolts. On the opposite side, there was a locked steel hatch that looked as though it hadn't been opened for decades. Adam studied the situation and came to a swift conclusion.

'I need my socket set.'

'And a big hammer?' suggested Madeline.

28. The severed finger

It was a forty-mile round trip that Madeline could have done without. She was beginning to feel weak again, after all, there was only so long her body could be nourished with toothpaste even if it did have whitener in it. She prepared Adam for the worst, specifically, carrying her again.

'So exactly how *do* you feed yourself?' asked Adam.

Madeline told him about the tubes and the lack of gourmet choices on her inbuilt automatic feeding system. Adam couldn't imagine living without steak, chips and English breakfasts. Perhaps he could suggest something.

'I know a little bit about pipes, after all, I did my apprenticeship in plumbing. One irritating thing about pipes is that they tend to block up. Have you tried blowing down your food tube, it might be a simple blockage?'

Madeline thought it was worth a try so she (Poppy) attempted to blow down the plastic pipe. As expected, it was well and truly blocked. Madeline's puffed cheeks, blowing at nothing tangible, made Adam smile. She had another go with all the puff she could muster and suddenly and satisfyingly, the blockage cleared. Cautiously she now began to suck.

'Rice pudding!' she cheered.

It was truly sublime. It may have been cold and lumpy but it was delicious and above all, highly nourishing. She engorged on it until the pipe blocked again, for good this time. At least she had managed to suck in a good meal and almost declare herself full.

This changed everything, the urgency of the situation abated, allowing her to concentrate on more important things. After a short time, she felt a resurgence of energy flowing through her Poppy veins. Now with no hunger pangs, she could return to being the charismatic Madeline android. They both took the journey time as an opportunity to catch up. Madeline told Adam her intriguing story. She held nothing back apart from three fairly insignificant details: she was an assassin, she had killed four people and she had wonderful sex with Mikael.

Adam's twelve months were naturally a complete contrast to Madeline's, but it wasn't without interest. After Poppy's funeral, life was predictably empty for him. Fortunately, work provided an escape from his thoughts. He was by trade, a security systems designer and as he had recently demonstrated, a brilliant one at that. This was a complete waste of his talents so he started up his own company making human tracking devices. These devices worked on the same principle as vehicle tracking devices but were miniaturised and taken orally in the form of a pill. The device, pill, took approximately twenty-four hours to pass through the body and then there were two options: use a new one or retrieve the old one. A pill with the child's breakfast became commonplace in many households. Because the pill was on the move all the time it was almost impossible for kidnappers and paedophiles to remove the device. So, for many, child abduction was temporarily almost wiped out. Alas, like everything else though, this wonderful innovation was abused. Police were inundated in tracking down children who had simply gone around next door to play, were sulking under the stairs, had run away to stay with their grandparents or were hiding under the bed because they didn't want to go to school. And so, the police had an epidemic of crying-wolf cases on their hands. The consequences of this resulted in the police's response time being longer than it took for the pill to pass through the body, and then it was too late. This whole saga lasted just a few months and would go down in history as a mere fad. However, a valuable lesson had been learned: Tracking devices in Cars and perhaps dogs and cats work, in children, they don't because basically, most children specialise in being mischievous. Adam made a lot of money and then lost it all, became famous and then forgotten, such is life.

Naturally, all this was bullshit but Madeline took it all in, up until the point where he added that he had almost perfected the soluble version for children who found it difficult to swallow pills.

Before they knew it, they were back at Adam's house. Madeline waited in the car while Adam went to fetch his tools. Before he could get the key in the lock, Jenny eagerly opened the door. Something was wrong, she made no comment, no expected greeting, she just uncomfortably glared at Adam and then at Madeline in the car. She remained silent; something was deeply troubling her. Adam assumed that, for some unfathomable reason, Jenny was perhaps jealous of Madeline. He brushed off her cool welcome and squeezed awkwardly past her, standing fast, in the doorway. Moments later, he returned with his tools.

'See you later, don't wait up!' he shouted as he climbed back into the

car.

‘That was a bit scary,’ said Madeline. ‘Is that another side to her?’

‘Don’t know. Never seen her like that before.’

There was noticeably less conversation on the return journey than on the outward journey. By no means had they run out of things to talk about but for now, they were enjoying quality time with each other and listening to the gentle music on the car radio. With no more than a handbrake and gear lever between them, contented, warm, happy feelings thrived and the car swallowed up the distance. Adam turned the radio up for the news.

‘…Reports are coming in of an explosion in an office block in Bristol. There has been one reported fatality: a Sidney Lister, the night watchman who appears to have taken the full force of the blast. Next-of-kin have been informed. The police have released video footage of a man and a woman seen in the vicinity who they want for questioning. The man, in his late thirties, has a beard and ponytail and the woman is slender, blonde and absolutely gorgeous.’

‘Shit!’ shrieked Madeline.

‘The bloody cheek, late *thirties*! At least now we know why Jenny had a face on her. She must have heard the news bulletin,’ said Adam.

‘Welcome to my world!’ groaned Madeline. ‘This can only mean one thing, someone knows about the basement and what it holds and is trying to get at me.’

‘Well let’s not jump to conclusions too quickly, it could just be a robbery.’

‘I suppose you’re right. At least I now know that I’m in that building somewhere.’

‘How do you come to that conclusion?’

‘I felt, and heard it. Didn’t want to mention it, but about an hour ago I felt a shudder and heard a muffled bang. Oh, and at the same time, a *Backup Power* warning appeared in the top right corner of my vision.’

‘Be thankful you’ve got backup power,’ said Adam, trying to find a bright side to the situation.

It would have been a serious oversight if Poppy’s life support didn’t have some sort of backup power supply. However, the reality was that the life expectancy for both Poppy and Madeline was as long as this backup power would last.

Adam had to park a considerable distance away from the brick shaft

because of the fire engines, ambulances and Police cars which had gathered haphazardly around the entrance to the ravaged building.

'We need a diversion… a video camera!' Madeline concluded.

'How's that going to help?'

'Trust me, I *was* a news correspondent you know. The only way we're going to get near the place is by pretending we're the Press.'

'Well, yes, I see where you're coming from, but as I see it, there are two possible drawbacks: one, we don't have a video camera and two, someone's sure to recognise us as the two wanted people.'

'Defeatist!'

Madeline looked around Adam's car and found everything she needed: a small stainless-steel flask, a plastic sandwich box, a roll of duct tape and a waterproof jacket. She took the top off the flask and emptied the cold fetid contents out of the window. Then she taped the flask to the sandwich box.

'Well, there's the camera! It's dark, no one will notice the difference.'

'Yes… and me?' asked Adam.

'That jacket has a hood, put it on and hide your face behind the camera.'

'And you?'

'Oh, don't worry about me, I have a little trick up my sleeve.'

Once again Madeline played with her mole. She selected:

'Tools',

'Appearance' and then selected

'Face 2'.

Instantly certain parts of Madeline's face began to inflate and certain parts began to deflate. It was all very subtle but enough for her appearance to completely change. Adam was initially horrified at this bizarre transformation, but he knew that this was one of the many peculiar things about Madeline he would have to get used to.

'Hmm, lovely,' said Adam insincerely.

The completely new version of Poppy that he was beginning to get used to, had suddenly changed into a far less attractive, puffy-faced woman. For shallow and selfish reasons, he dearly hoped that she wouldn't get stuck in *face 2*.

The deception worked well. Madeline was right, no one, it appeared,

challenged the Press. No one seemed to notice that it wasn't a proper camera and no one seemed to notice that she was talking absolute gibberish.

'And as you can see, the main damage to the building is around the entrance area. Now that the fire is out and the dust has died down we can see the extent of the damage …'

Madeline continued using her old media talents while edging nearer and nearer to the debris. There was now a mountain of rubble where the entrance doors used to be and presumably close to where Sid, the night watchman, lost his life. The fact that there was no workable entrance anymore was of no concern because this time, they would be going in through the air vent shaft. The brick-built shaft was fortunately untouched by the blast, but presently there was far too much activity in the area. Nothing else for it, they would have to return later.

Eagerly, they returned to the sanctuary of Adam's car. Madeline put her face back to its previous beautiful state. Fortunately, her silicone skin suffered no ill effects from the disfiguration, so they kissed. The kiss became an embrace and the embrace became a frantic race to take their clothes off.

Adam had been saving himself, obviously not for Poppy, he thought she was dead, but for someone in the distant future when his memories of Poppy had dissolved away. How was he to know this someone would, ironically, turn out to be Poppy but now called Madeline and in a completely different body? Such is life! Adam decided that it was pointlessly trying to compare. Poppy and Madeline were different, there was no denying it, but he was still making love to Poppy and that was all that mattered. As Madeline had discovered previously, she was complete in every way possible, but now, after the American improvements, her skin was indiscernible from human flesh. Every part of her body was smooth and warm to the touch. Every last bit of her was just as it should be.

After the second round of passion, Madeline had a clear conscience. She may have lost her virginity with Mikael, but that was purely experimental – of course, it was. This was the real thing. She was making love to someone she loved. It never crossed her mind to demonstrate her super flexibility even though it may have come in handy in the back of a car. This time, that kind of extreme behaviour would have been inappropriate and just showing off. She wanted Adam to treat her exactly as he would have done if she was Poppy – normal.

How she wanted to be normal.

During the third time, Adam momentarily became analytical. He wondered who exactly he was making love to. Was it Poppy, Madeline or an Android? He wasn't particularly bothered, he knew poppy was there somewhere in the equation.

Fortunately for Adam, by the time Madeline was ready for the fourth time, all the emergency services had left, but not before they had made the area completely hazard-free. This involved dozens of rolls of hazard tape and miles of barrier fencing. The clear-up squad would no doubt arrive in the morning, but for now, it was well-deserved bedtime for all but one unfortunate solitary policeman left on guard.

'I don't suppose, for a second, he's going to present a problem. What's it going to be then, sleeping gas, laser on stun?' inquired Adam.

'How did *you* know I've got a laser weapon? I've only just had it fitted.'

'It was meant to be a joke.'

'Never joke, you'd be amazed what this body of mine can do.'

'Pity you don't have something non-physical, like hypnotism.'

'Haven't tried the laser yet, it's the same device they fitted to the HDU-4s.'

'The H D what?'

'Come on, surely you heard about the robot incident… America… A few weeks ago?'

Adam gave a blank response.

'Well, now's a good time as any to try it out.'

Without any forethought, Madeline began wiggling her mole. She found a new entry in the weapons menu, weapon 5 which she assumed was the Laser gun and selected *minimum* setting. As she wasn't exactly sure which finger would be the weapon, she pointed all her fingers at the policeman and then firmly pressed her mole. Immediately the nail of her first finger hinged upwards and emitted an intense beam of light toward the Policeman. This effectively lit up the poor man on the beat with a bluish-green hue and made him fall gently to the ground. Adam immediately raced across and checked his heartbeat and breathing. Fortunately, the policeman was still alive. Adam was not impressed with Madeline's recklessness.

'You do realise you could have killed him. That's something Poppy certainly wouldn't have done!' said Adam sternly with a face to

match.

Madeline didn't say anything, she couldn't. Adam was right, the old Poppy would never have taken such an irresponsible gamble with someone's life. From her new perspective, she had developed a trivial attitude toward violence, maiming and even killing, things that used to be unthinkable. The policeman could now, quite easily be dead. Even though the setting was on minimum, minimum may not have meant *stun*, it may have meant kill quickly and gently as opposed to slowly and painfully or vice-versa. He most probably had a wife and several children, but apart from that, he was a person who had just as much right to live as she did. She stared at the unconscious body not knowing what to say. Adam was unquestionably right. Tears formed in Poppy's eyes but annoyingly, the *system* refused to pass on any emotional weakness to Madeline's form. She didn't want this, she didn't want any of it! She wanted to be back in her old job and her old unburnt body, marry Adam and have Kids. 'Bastard Gogli, bastard, bastard Gogli,' she inwardly cursed.

With a burst of anger, she tore off the end section of her perfect index finger – the part that contained the laser emitter. Yellow silicone blood slowly oozed from the self-inflicted wound.

'What did you do that for, silly? That could have come in handy.'

'I've managed without it up to now. You're right, I could have killed him. It doesn't bear thinking about. You won't see that side of me again.'

'Give me your hand,' said Adam in a calming manner.

Adam reached into his pocket, took out a piece of chewing gum, chewed it for a few seconds and then stuffed it into her finger end. Even though Madeline was no longer flesh and blood, to Adam, this was still a serious injury. Madeline was in pain, perhaps not physically but mentally. It was clear that he had touched a nerve and a sensitive one at that. Madeline didn't want to be like this, she wanted to be like everyone else, but that was impossible – something only a fairy godmother could put right.

This impulsive behaviour was something new and unexpected, totally out of character for the feisty Madeline automaton. During the last twelve months, she had shown no signs of irrationality just consistent boldness and resolve. Perhaps Adam was having a subtle effect on her newly fashioned personality. However, Adam was right, it was a silly thing to have done. After all, it *was* a very effective weapon.

Adam discretely picked up the detached fingernail section of her finger with the laser emitter attached and put it in his pocket.

‘Get his truncheon, we may need it now!’ said Adam assertively.

As it happened, the only tool required was a 17-millimetre socket spanner. Madeline kept watch while Adam struggled, sweated and swore as he undid the heavily corroded bolts. Every so often, a car drove by or someone on foot walked past. This was an opportunity to down tools and embrace each other, as lovers do, bathed in the orange glow from the sodium street lights. Eventually, after many interruptions, the last rusty bolt was removed and the heavy steel vent fell to the ground revealing a square access into the brick shaft.

Fumbling around in the darkness with his hands through the access hole, he located the top two rungs of a steel ladder. There was no argument, Adam was going in first despite his mild claustrophobia. Madeline had no such inhibitions. She kicked off her high-heeled shoes and cheerfully followed in behind him. Small tight dark spaces were a breeze to Madeline. After all, in reality, her real body was snugly squeezed inside a steel tank, permanently surrounded by a liquid darkness. Three metres down, the shaft branched off horizontally. Presumably, this route led to the decoy room, where they were earlier. Continuing another three metres down, the shaft changed to a horizontal direction. Now a faint glow could be seen in the distance. Adam awkwardly rotated and wriggled his body to negotiate the 90-degree turn. Madeline had no such problem as her joints just seemed to bend in any direction. After a few minutes of squeezing and pushing, they were greeted with a heavy metal grille at the end of the shaft. So near but so far. The real home of Poppy could be seen through the louvres, lit faintly by the monitor on the wall. Adam applied several sharp kicks to the grill but it refused to budge.

‘What the hell are we going to do now?’ said Adam having a mild panic attack.

‘If I can get past, I might have a solution.’

This did not help Adam’s fear of small dark spaces. In any other circumstances, being so close and intimate with each other would have been no bad thing, but certainly not in the confinement of the cold, damp, dark shaft. After a certain amount of squeezing and wriggling in an attempt to exchange places, they both accepted that they were well and truly wedged together. There was only one thing for it, only one possible solution. Thank God it’s dark, she thought as she completely deflated both her boobs.

‘I think that may help.’

‘Why, what have you done?’

‘Another little trick, best you don’t know, just yet.’

The extra few inches of space made all the difference. Moments later, Madeline was closest to the grille and Adam was hyperventilating.

‘Something else I have built into one of my fingers, an ultrasonic thingummy. I’ve never tried it before, but it might just loosen the bolts.’

Adam was far too busy trying to control his breathing to take much notice of what Madeline was saying.

In the usual way, the ultrasonic feature was selected and energised. She wasn’t exactly sure which finger it was that was ultrasonically vibrating so she tried them all. It was her ring finger on her right hand that made the grill hum loudly. She touched the edge of the grill with this particular finger and after a few seconds, she heard a bolt falling to the floor in the room beyond.

With only a glimmer of light coming through the grille, Adam struggled to see his hand in front of his face. However, Madeline was conveniently fitted with zero-lux cameras for eyes, enabling her to see everything clearly. It took no more than five minutes to release all the bolts. Her newly tested gadget was surprisingly effective. Without anything now holding the grille to the wall, with a small tap, it fell to the floor with a clang. The room in its full glory was now accessible.

One by one, they oozed out of the square hole, into the room. Madeline first, elegantly backflipping onto her feet, Adam followed clumsily falling head first, down onto the hard floor. While Adam recovered and composed himself, Madeline discretely restored her shapely figure. No doubt in the fullness of time, Adam would be introduced to all her amazing features, both detrimental and beneficial to her perfect form. However, for now, size mattered.

Adam hastily found the light switch and suddenly everything was revealed: the room, the lab, numerous cabinets, boxes of technical wizardry, the cold tiled floor and…

Her holding tank in the far corner of the room.

She tussled with what she knew as fact and tried her best to discount it. The bland, stark, stainless-steel tank belied its true purpose. It couldn’t help but send a cold shiver down both her spines. Contrary to everything that Madeline was now, was inside that tank: an immobile, withered, atrophied husk of what used to be her. If *it* died, got ill, got cold, got thirsty or got hungry, she would automatically follow suit. There was nothing she could do to avoid the many pitfalls of her real body. Adam realised that despite Madeline’s cavalier attitude, she was suppressing heaps of pent-up anger, resentment and foreboding. Her new life was by no means as wonderful as she made out. Adam had to

say something, perhaps it was unnecessary, but he was compelled to say it all the same, 'So, you're in there, in that tank?'

'What are you on about, I'm here! It's Poppy that's in the tank!' she snapped.

Adam decided not to go any further with this line of conversation. Clearly, Madeline had certain identity issues which Adam realised were best not to pursue. There was no doubt that she did have issues regarding exactly who she was. The simplest answer was that she *was* Madeline and she *was* Poppy two entirely different entities. One was the height of ableness and the other, a pathetic, immobile cripple. One was pure perfection, the other damaged beyond repair. But they both needed each other. Neither could exist without the other. It was a symbiosis in every sense of the word.

'Adam, I'm getting hungry again.'

Adam needed no encouragement, he went straight to Poppy's tank and traced the food pipe back to its food source. The food machine was little more than a modified vending machine which had not only blocked up but also was running dangerously low on supplies. A serious bit of maintenance was required. Adam filled the machine's containers with the contents of cardboard boxes piled up beside them. Another of Adam's many occupations in his early life was a vending machine maintenance man, so he knew exactly what he was doing. With that task done he cleared any blockages from the pipes, tubes and food delivery system linking Poppy's tank to the vending machine.

'There, try that!' said Adam, smugly.

In no time Madeline was finally enjoying a hearty meal of beef stew and dumplings, in puree form. With that important task done, Adam now had a chance to study all the equipment and devices controlling Poppy's tank. He was truly overwhelmed with the scale of the technology and equally impressed with the seventy-inch monitor on the wall.

'I don't know if I like seeing myself in that much detail,' remarked Adam.

'Sorry, I'll try and look at something else… Sorry, I can't!'

The large monitor displayed Madeline's eyesight just like the smaller monitor did in the other basement room.

Adam was a comforting sight. He made her happy and protected even if he did lack Madeline's arsenal of advanced weaponry.

‘So, you agree, it is an invasion of *my* privacy?’ suggested Madeline.

‘But fantastic picture quality… I think it ought to be turned off to conserve power, don’t you?’ suggested Adam.

‘Fine by me!’

With a push of a switch, the monitor went black. Madeline’s sights were now her own and private, in this room, at least. The next problem that required urgent attention was the power supply to Poppy’s tank. At the moment it was running on some sort of backup power. Adam quickly found the reserve power supply equipment in a small room behind a thick fire door.

‘Pop… Madeline, come and have a look at this!’

Madeline was completely preoccupied with the austerity of her tank to respond to Adam. It had been many months since she last saw her real home. To call it home was somewhat surreal and chilled her soul. Within the confines of the stainless-steel box/tank/coffin, was where she was, where she really lived/existed, where she would probably be forever. It was the size that surprised her, far smaller than she remembered. It wasn’t much bigger than a launderette washing machine. ‘Surely there’s not enough space inside to stretch out my legs,’ she thought. One of the original stipulations for the scientist to proceed with the ‘Mad Bull’ project was that her body had to be intact, with no amputations. The only conclusion she could come to was that she was not as tall as she thought she was. The thought of having any of her limbs missing was kept in the deepest, darkest recess of her mind.

There was always an inkling of hope at the back of her mind that one day, she might be free of this Madeline Bull body and be normal and Poppy again. Of course, this was wishful thinking to the extreme, but positive thinking was something she strongly believed in.

The tank stood on an array of shock absorbers and hydraulic rams and was reinforced by a tubular steel cage. The sides were unhindered, polished stainless-steel panels, surprisingly warm to the touch. She tapped one of the flat side panels for no reason at all – her whole automaton body slightly shuddered. The necessary wiring and pipework all emerged from the top and dispersed in every direction to various other pieces of equipment. It was the sheer number of cables that worried Madeline. What did each wire do? What if there was a bad joint? What if there was a short circuit? How often did she need servicing? How reliable was she? One thing for sure, she definitely needed regular maintenance – which she wasn’t getting.

It was perhaps for the best that Adam called her once more. She

forced herself out of her stupor and tracked him down to the power room, Adam was waiting excitedly.

‘Impressive, eh? Just look at the size of these fuel cells, and all these hydrogen cylinders! There’s enough energy in reserve here to keep your system going for months, perhaps years. This groundbreaking technology must have cost millions!’

‘Yes, it’s the same kind of thing that powers me but mine is a miniature fuel cell. I’ve got one inside me. I have to plug myself into the mains once a month to power an electric…izer.’ said Madeline proudly.

Adam was taken aback by the complexity of everything about him. Clearly, there was no expense spared with this so-called Mad Bull project. He couldn’t help but wonder what the true cost of this technology was for Poppy.

‘You mean electrolyser,’ Adam corrected her.

‘Yes, do I?’

‘It makes hydrogen from water to run your fuel cell. You know, no one gives you all this for nothing. There has to be one hell of an obligation attached to all this,’ pried Adam.

He could fish all he liked for an answer but somehow, he knew he wasn’t going to get one just yet.

‘Yes, I’m very grateful. Anyway, how do I get rid of this annoying red *backup power* sign in my vision?’ asked Madeline, avoiding the subject of her obligation.

Adam gingerly pressed a few buttons and threw a few switches on the power console. He wasn’t completely sure what he was doing but he was convinced that this was the only way to find out.

‘There, how’s that?’

‘Adam you’re a genius, it’s gone. It just says “power fail” now.’

‘Bugger!’ said Adam.

Frantically, he repressed all the buttons and switches that he’d just pressed in random order.

‘How’s that?’

‘Adam, once again you’ve surpassed yourself, it now says “backup power”, again.’

‘I think we’ll leave it at that, don’t you?’ said Adam wisely.

This was the light-hearted banter that they'd both missed so much. Despite the bizarre circumstances, they could vaguely describe themselves as being happy again, but that happiness was about to be short-lived…

As they re-entered the main room, their smiles instantly dissolved away. Two soulless men stood together in the centre of the room. One was tall and the other considerably shorter, dressed exactly like hospital porters, wearing gas masks and both carrying handguns.

'Who the hell, are you?' asked Adam assertively.

It happened so quickly that the surging pain followed a few moments after the shock of what the tall thug had done. Adam suddenly discovered that he had a bullet hole in the top of his trousers. Then, he realised there was a little more to it than that, as he fell to the floor while screaming out in pain.

'We do the talking!' bawled the short thug through the grill in his gas mask.

'It's your lucky day, I was aiming for your balls,' said the tall thug, also through his gas mask grill.

Madeline said nothing; encouragement was something they didn't appear to need. She ripped a strip of material off Adam's trousers and used it to bandage his wound. This bothersome situation wouldn't normally pose a problem with Madeline's arsenal of weaponry. She had her highly effective fart gas, but they were somehow prepared for that eventuality. She also had her 'taser' weapon but that only dealt with one at a time and there were two of them, both with guns. The most effective weapon at her disposal would have been her laser gun, but foolishly, only a short while ago she had vandalised it.

'Don't try to move, sweetheart,' whispered Madeline.

'Leave him!' snapped the tall thug.

Whilst Madeline was finishing off the makeshift bandage, Adam discreetly passed her, her fingernail with the laser emitter attached. It was a deluded but brave move as the laser weapon was now, most probably, useless. Madeline stared into Adam's eye and said one simple short word,

'Sorry'.

The short thug forcefully dragged Madeline away from Adam and then proceeded to wrap parcel tape around her arm covering her mole. Whilst he was doing this, the large thug attached a grey plastic box to Adam's arm using more tape.

‘This box contains high explosives and this button (referring to a pendant device around his neck) detonates it. It’s up to you. If you don’t co-operate or try anything clever, boom! Compredez?’ said the tall thug, totally lacking any compassion.

Adam said nothing, moved nothing and silently suffered his bullet wound. At first, Madeline just nodded but after a moment was impelled to say something,

‘Alright, you’ve done your homework on…’

‘…Shut it, freak!’ interrupted the tall thug.

‘Tie him to that chair!’ boomed the short thug.

The tall thug manhandled Adam onto a tubular framed chair and produced a long length of rope from his pocket. Moments later, Adam’s hands were securely and painfully bound together around the back of the chair. On reflection, however, their proficient evilness didn’t match their skills in tying knots, as Adam could just stand up and leave the chair behind.

‘He was right,’ said the short thug as he checked the tightness of the knot his partner had tied, ‘He said it would be piss-easy.’

Madeline was intrigued, she had to ask the question even if she didn’t get an answer.

‘I gather you’re not doing this on behalf of the British government?’

Neither of the men replied but the small thug cocked his gun and calmly shot Adam in his other leg for her insolence.

Adam screamed from another burst of pain; Madeline screamed in sympathy.

‘Shit! Missed. I was aiming for his balls too,’ said the small thug to the tall thug.

‘Not on form today,’ said the tall thug.

The two men were completely indifferent to the pain and grief they were causing. Nothing personal, but they had a job to do and that was that. Then it became apparent that they were following a set of instructions written on a small piece of paper. The short thug read out the next line of the instructions, *‘You can now remove your masks.’*

They didn’t exactly know why they could do this at this particular time, they just did. They didn’t know why they had to leave Madeline unharmed either. Naturally, they would have liked to have beaten her up a little, molested her and then raped her but that was expressly forbidden in the notes. They hadn’t the slightest notion that Madeline

was an android. That concept was clearly well beyond their level of comprehension.

Presumably, their job was to deliver her to their employer and then they could collect their money. They were mercenaries of the worst kind, the ones with absolutely no conscience, no compassion and very few brain cells. The sort who would do absolutely anything for a modest amount of money. Presumably, they were responsible for blowing up the entrance to the building, killing an innocent night watchman called Sid in the process. As target practice, they had also put a couple of bullet holes in Adam's legs. Perhaps they would consider asking for more money as these acts of barbarity were extras and not specified on the list.

Suddenly, from everything going quite well: food in Madeline's (Poppy's) belly, meeting up with Adam and finding out that there was no particular urgency with her backup power indicator, everything had suddenly, without warning, turned very grim indeed. Madeline accepted that, for the moment, she was powerless despite being the most sophisticated combat machine on the planet. There was nothing she could do. Poor Adam was in agony with bullet wounds in his legs and a rope cutting cruelly into both wrists. Never before had he experienced so much pain coming from so many places. Aspirins would not have taken the job on.

The tall thug dragged a small metal table across the room and placed it underneath the shaft entrance in the wall. He beckoned Madeline onto the table and then into the shaft. She had no option but to comply, giving Adam a last sorrowful look. Her anguish gnawed at her heart, her remorse drowned her spirit, it was all too much to bear. For now, all she could do was to mouth, 'I love you,' before she reluctantly climbed into the vent hole.

Finally, the penny dropped. Now she understood why her creators forbade her from contacting anyone from her previous existence. Why she had to start a new life and leave her old one behind. It wasn't, as she previously thought, for regimental, pernickety reasons, it was fundamentally, for everyone's safety. She had only been with Adam a few hours and already he had two bullet holes in his legs and a bomb taped to his arm. Mikael irrefutably died from Madeline's carelessness. Turner had been murdered, more than likely because he knew her. Not only was she a loose cannon, but she was also very, very dangerous to know.

The thugs followed behind her, silent and completely unconcerned about the suffering they were leaving behind. Suddenly, Adam was on his own, in agony and bleeding to death with no one to help him.

When Madeline broke the surface, there was a new presence of police cars around the entrance of the battered building. Presumably, they were investigating why the police officer left on guard, had not responded to his radio calls.

The tall thug hovered his thumb over the button on his pendant, thinking Madeline was about to alert the police but she was simply putting her shoes back on. He gestured aggressively at her long blonde hair. Reluctantly, she tucked it down her top. Unfortunately, no one took the trouble to notice a beautiful blonde and two reprobates, suspiciously slinking out of the shrubbery and walking across to a nearby parked van.

The tall thug opened the rear doors of the van and showed Madeline where she was to be secured during the journey. Once again, they were following their instructions to the letter. Precise details were given as to how to restrain her, which included a detailed diagram showing how Madeline was to stand. Handcuffs were used to attach Madeline's outstretched arms to the side pillars of the van innards. Her legs were also fastened similarly, akimbo, with cufflinks fastening her ankles to the bottom of the side pillars. They had no idea why she had to be fastened in this extreme way, but she appeared to be moderately uncomfortable and that was good enough for them.

Whoever had given these precise instructions, obviously knew all about the Madeline Bull android and how important it was that her mole could not be reached by any other part of her very supple body.

'What are you lady, a Kung Fu expert or something?' asked the short thug.

'Bet I could take her on,' the tall thug bragged.

'How about it lady, do y' want to take him on?'

Naturally, Madeline didn't get involved in this moronic, juvenile banter. The men were pleased with their handiwork and attention to detail. Apparently, everything had gone according to plan. They were convinced that their employer would be pleased with their work and happily pay them a significant bonus. Then they could get out of their overalls, wash their faces and get back to their wives and families, and possibly be good people again.

'Answer me something,' said Madeline hoping to add some sanity to the unpleasant experience.

'What!'

'What's the range of that little transmitter?'

‘Let’s find out, eh?’ said the tall thug obligingly.

It happened in an instant although Madeline saw everything in slow motion. His evil hand travelled across to the pendant and then his thumb slowly, but firmly pressed the button. Neither of the thugs had any indication that the transmitter had worked, but they had every confidence in the technology that they had been provided with. Madeline, on the other hand, heard the bang with her real body, felt the explosive force with her real body and then screamed out sufficiently for Madeline’s artificial vocal cords to overload and distort. She tried not to think of Adam’s body which had obviously been blown apart and spattered throughout the lab in small fleshy pieces, but the image had a will of its own. There and then she wanted to die. Die so that they could hopefully be together again, far away from this awful, awful world.

After her anguished scream, she settled into complete silence. Clearly, it was always their intention to explode the device at some stage in their mission and this happened to be a convenient time. Completely unconcerned with her grief, they slammed the rear van doors shut, putting Madeline in total darkness. Moments later the engine started and the van violently surged forwards.

There was no question about it, these men had to die… and die badly.

29. Mass murderer

Her heart was broken, as simple as that.

Now there was only one thing in Madeline's thoughts and that was overwhelming revenge. She *would* break free of these shackles and then she *would* do what she was now very good at – killing people. Exactly how she was going to break free was not abundantly clear. If she could manipulate her mole, she was home and dry but her snare was well designed. For a start, her mole had been taped up, but even if it hadn't been, the situation was still impossible. With her inherent suppleness, her feet could have easily reached her magic mole, but both of them were fastened down. Her hands could bend all the way backwards as well as forwards but her fingers were still inches short of touching her mole. It was hopeless. If she could enter sleep mode or if the radio link disconnected, she could operate her systems without her mole. This was something she had discovered a while back. However, while active, she couldn't do anything without first manipulating the cute little blemish on her arm. A normal android would just rip the metal pillars away from the van sides with its super strength but Madeline hadn't, as yet, discovered that particular feature. She couldn't slide her feet or hands out of the handcuffs either because they were crushingly tight. After a good ten minutes of wrenching, tugging, swearing, twisting and crying, she came to one gloomy conclusion, escape was impossible.

In some ways, it was a good thing she was securely attached to the sides of the van because if she hadn't been, she would have been thrown around like a doll in a tumble drier. Whoever was driving either had lead shoes or was determined to give Madeline a very uncomfortable journey.

Perhaps thought control could motivate things, 'telekinesis and all that,' she thought, so she put her gloom to one side and concentrated for all she was worth. Moments later, she noticed a comment, flashing away in the top right corner of her vision:

ULTRASONIC MODE ACTIVATED

'Funny,' she thought, 'I'm sure that wasn't there a moment ago.'

Normally this would have been Turner intervening, but it couldn't be him, he was dead. It was the last device she used to release the bolts from the grille. Perhaps she never turned it off and this was a reminder that it was still on, or, perhaps it was the power of her mind! It was very strange indeed, but the ultrasonic device built into her index finger was active. She could feel her whole arm vibrating. She folded back her finger and her wrist until her vibrating fingertip was touching the handcuff. The intense vibrations effectively shook the mechanism of the handcuff apart. One hand was now free and that's all she needed. In no time at all, she was free from all her restraints.

The priority was to see what she was doing, even her zero-lux vision was struggling to work in the darkness of the van innards. Eventually, she found a switch which she hoped was a light switch. She slid the switch and was temporarily dazzled until her intricate optics adjusted to the correct exposure setting. She looked at the four handcuffs which were now in several pieces all over the van floor and then she looked at the heavily blood-stained plywood walls of her mobile prison. Immediately, she realised she had something in common with the thugs: they were inhuman.

They were also evil and would soon be dead.

Despite Adam's last moments of adversity, she remembered that he had done one last thing for her. It was such a painful memory, but he was selfless to the end. She reached into her pocket and took out a yellow-stained part of her finger. To be precise, it was a vital part of the laser weapon which she had impulsively wrenched out of her finger. The yellow stain was her android blood but other than that it was intact and undamaged. After a good clean, she pushed it back into the finger it came out of with a satisfying click.

The Laser beam had to be tested. She removed the tape wrapped around her arm to reveal her cute little mole, then selected *'Weapon 5',* then *'Level 10'*. She aimed her finger and with another press of her mole, a powerful laser beam fired out of her finger and promptly cut a nice neat hole in the floor of the van.

'Excellent,' she said, without emotion.

Now it was time for retribution.

She turned the light off and then repeatedly thumped as hard as she could on the metal panel separating her from the front cab area. The van noticeably slowed but only momentarily. She thumped a few more times and the van suddenly screeched to a halt. She heard the cab doors open and slam shut.

'Any second now,' she said to herself.

The back doors violently swung open.

‘Right, you’ve asked for this!’ said the short thug.

In the semi-darkness, they could just about make out that she was no longer fastened up. The short thug already had his gun cocked and ready to fire even though they had strict instructions not to damage her. This was of no concern as Madeline’s laser finger had already energised. His entire lower arm, the one which held the gun, suddenly fell to the ground with a soft splat. Thanks to the cauterising effect of the laser, there was no blood and no mess. The tall thug received exactly the same treatment, losing his arm well before he had a chance to react. For a brief moment, the two men were shocked more than anything else. The pain signals had not yet reached their inferior brains. They had time to watch their arms settle on the ground beneath them before any discomfort troubled them.

They had the chance, they could have accepted defeat and legged it but they didn’t. This was a mistake they would regret for the rest of their pitiful lives which just happened to be five seconds. With one simple slicing action, Madeline swept her laser finger horizontally from left to right across both their midriffs. Amazingly, both of them managed to say, ‘shit!’ while their top halves calmly detached from their bottom halves, and then all parts tumbled to the ground. No blood and no mess, a perfect clean kill.

‘Six!’ affirmed Madeline, wondering if she was now classed as a mass murderer.

Against her better judgement, Madeline was compelled to return to the lab. Although the only signs of Adam would most likely be his entrails scattered about the room, it was something she had to do.

Before she could continue on her way, she had a moral duty to tidily dispose of the six body parts. Firstly, she thought it would be a good idea to search the scattered pockets for a clue as to the identity of their employer. Oddly, the only items found were the list of precise instructions and a mobile phone. They had carried out all but the last instruction which was to take her to somewhere in Merthyr-Tydfil, South Wales. She accessed the contacts list on the phone. It was empty apart from one solitary name: Barton, no first name or initial. Without hesitation, she pressed the little green button, it rang out.

‘Hello, is that Mr Barton?’

There was a certain amount of silence before any response came from Madeline’s simple question.

‘Madeline?’ asked Barton hesitantly.

Madeline had heard this familiar voice before. Once it had been a friendly voice, a voice she could trust and depend on.

'How did you get this number?' continued Barton.

It was definitely him. Without a doubt the same person, but now apparently a different persona. She was shocked and gutted. A friendship that had been forged over many weeks, dissolved in an instant. Logic dictated that it had to be one of the four scientists or one of the two surgeons. They were the only people *alive,* who knew the precautions to take against her built-in weaponry… and her main weakness, Adam. However, not in a million years would she have suspected that it would be him!

'Reynolds? Chris Reynolds?' asked Madeline in disbelief.

'Yes, I'm afraid so.'

'But… but, how could you? I completely trusted you…'

'Madeline, why, what's happened? You CAN trust me…'

'Trust you!? Don't insult my intelligence, I thought you ought to know, I've killed your two stooges and guess who's next on my list?'

'Maddy, there are greater things at work here, things you don't understand.'

'I understand everything perfectly, especially that my precious, wonderful Adam is dead…'

She had to pause for a moment to regain control of her fragile emotions. Reality had cruelly reasserted itself. Adam was dead.

'As far as I'm concerned, this ends now. There's nothing any worse that you can do to me… Barton, whatever your name is, I'm coming for you!'

With that, she pressed the end call button. Yes, she was a little impetuous, but she meant what she said. There was no room for forgiveness, Kill Barton had been added to her 'to-do' list.

Once the roadside ditch had been filled with two men's worth of assorted body parts, she set off, back to the lab, in the grimy, battered van. The revelation that Madeline's old trusted friend, Chris Reynolds was a ruthless monster called Barton was now beginning to sting. Not so long ago, Chris Reynolds behaved like a father figure, calling her Maddy (which now annoyed her intensely) and treating her almost as his daughter. There were bad times but equally, there were some good times in the lab during the many weeks it took for her to become accustomed to her new body. There was no indication, whatsoever,

that he had any ulterior motives, any underlying grievances or any evil intentions. What the hell was he up to, why had he had Adam killed? A distasteful theory formed in her thoughts, she dearly hoped she was wrong. Perhaps he was jealous of Adam. Perhaps he never wanted to be a father figure at all. Perhaps he wanted to be an awful lot more. She shuddered at the thought. Naturally, she was way off track, but her mind was buzzing with hysterical thoughts.

'He's almost old enough to be my granddad!' she said out loud.

Madeline parked the van out of sight, a few streets away from the ventilation shaft and walked the rest of the way. It was still dark and bucketing down with rain but this was of little consequence. By now, the security arrangements around the building entrance area had been considerably strengthened. Two new, far more austere-looking policemen were now on guard, one guarding the front of the building and the other hovering around the ventilation shaft structure. This was inconvenient, to say the least. The original policeman had completely recovered from being on the receiving end of Madeline's laser weapon. However, as a result of lying on the cold damp ground for some time, he'd caught a chill and gone home to have a hot bath.

Unfortunately, these two policemen may well have to endure the same fate. Se inflated her boobs slightly and then made herself known to the policeman guarding the front of the building. Somehow, she had to bring the two of them close together. She began by flirting disgracefully.

'Oh, my goodness, what's happened here then, handsome?' said Madeline cheekily, as she seductively shook some of the excess rain off her beautiful hair. Being Seductive was second nature to her.

'Sorry miss, I'll have to ask you to move along, the building is unsafe.'

'I work here, I say work, I mostly make tea for my pervy boss, I think he fancies me… Third floor up, look, you can see my desk up there. Do you think they'll give me the day off tomorrow because of this?'

'Tomorrow and a few more days, I should imagine, miss.'

'Great…'

'Not great for the night watchman.'

'You're kidding, Sid? Is he alright?'

'No, he died in the explosion.'

'Oh my god, poor chap. What was it, a bomb or something?'

By now the other policeman had strolled over, as policemen do, and

joined his colleague for support. Just like them, Madeline could also do something for queen and country and that was fart! Within seconds they were sleeping like kittens on the cold, damp floor. They too would require hot baths in the fullness of time.

Time was at a premium, she had to hurry. It wouldn't be long before the lack of response from the sleeping policemen would be investigated. She raced across to the brick shaft and climbed in. Moments later, she was shuffling towards the vent opening into the lab (Poppy's home) where she had left Adam not much more than an hour ago. Then he was wounded but alive. Then he was in terrific pain but his strength and bravery were defiantly shining through. But now, her imagination had already told her what she was going to find. However, imagination was never based on fact.

She was shocked to find the room much as she left it. There was no bomb devastation, no fleshy Adam bits splashed about the walls and ceiling and only a small pool of blood where Adam had been shot… twice. The main double doors to the room, however, were extensively damaged. The hinges were wrenched out of the wooden jambs and the safety wired glass in the doors had shattered. Her immediate assumption was that Adam had valiantly dragged himself out into the corridor to protect the valuable contents of the room if the bomb, taped to his arm, went off. This was too much to bear. He had been gallant to the end, thinking only of her despite his pain and imminent death. She was compelled to venture into the corridor beyond the damaged doors, drawing her like a magnet, enticing her and taunting her. The doors had withstood the blast and done their job admirably – she forced them open.

The corridor was dark but she could clearly see the devastation, the charred walls, gaping holes in the plaster and piles of debris. Strangely though, there was no sign of Adam, no mangled limbs, no splattered blood, no bits of sinew hanging off anything. Madeline came to just one conclusion, possibly, just possibly, there was hope. Goodness knows how, but Adam could still be alive.

She had no intention of stopping long, she went over to her real self and gently touched the side of the tank. Just as she was about to leave, she spotted Adam's car keys on top of a piece of paper on the desk. Written on the paper was a short note, it read:

My dearest Poppy/Madeline,
don't worry about me, I will be OK.
Please be gentle with my car.
See you soon, all my love,
Adam. xx

This time Poppy couldn't hold the tears back, they cascaded down her real cheeks, stinging her damaged flesh. In unison, saline fluid did the same thing and flowed down Madeline's cheeks. They were tears of relief and happiness *and* frustration and distress, all rolled into one.

'Only two kisses? Mingy devil!' she said between the sniffles.

She forcibly pulled herself together and put the short note and car keys in her jacket pocket.

'Thank God!' she said as she wiped the tears away from her damp cheeks, not appreciating the technology required to make this happen. 'I haven't got to use that bloody awful van!'

There was something definitely going on. Luck was one thing, good fortune another, but Madeline could almost see the whites of her fairy godmother's eyes. Not that she was ungrateful or anything, but it was clear she *was* being watched over and it certainly wasn't by fairies. Unquestionably, someone had helped her escape from the van by activating her ultrasonic device and this someone it seemed, may also have saved Adam. Presumably, he had been taken away to have his wounds attended to, she desperately needed to know where.

The policemen were still out cold – cold just as much as out. Both police radios, however, were crackling with chatter:

'Come in 26.'

'Come in 46.'

Madeline yanked one of the radios away from the policeman's lapel and pressed the 'talk' switch. There was something she had to ask.

'This is Madeline Bull. I have to inform you that your officers are sleeping on the job. Could you please tell me where have you taken Adam, my boyfriend, last seen with bullet holes in his legs?' said Madeline loudly and clearly, she didn't want to have to repeat herself.

'Sorry, can you repeat please?'

'This… is… Madeline… Bull, officers asleep. Where… is… my… bloody… boyfriend… last… seen… with… bullet… holes… in… legs?'

'Madeline? Is that Madeline Bull? This is chief inspector Stoddard. Adam is okay and in safe hands. His wounds are being treated. I'm sorry, but for his own safety, as yet, I can't tell you where he is. I hope you understand.'

It was wonderful news but soured because she desperately wanted to see her Adam, care for him, kiss his wounds better and reply to his lovely short note, but this Stoddard chap, wouldn't let her.

‘What did he mean, for his own safety? I wasn’t the one who shot him or taped a bomb to his arm,’ she said to herself.

Then she realised, it *was* her. She was the one who was a liability. Anyone who got wrapped up in Madeline’s affairs was dicing with all kinds of dangers, even death. She mellowed and accepted that, after all, he was alive. He hadn’t been blown apart and someone, somewhere, was mending his bullet holes. The thought of what could have happened was too much to contemplate and sent a shudder through her titanium spine.

She had to keep her mind occupied while she waited for Adam so she formulated a plan of action. She had an assassination pending, but that could wait. She was running out of fart gas, that could also wait. A red light was flashing in her viewer, she urgently required a recharge, that couldn’t wait. It was a good time to return to her flat.

Once again, she was in the bath, up to her neck in suds. Things are always relative. No longer did her flat feel uninviting, cold and lonely. This was because things had significantly changed for the better… and worse. She wiggled her mole beneath the waterline, she was, after all, completely waterproof. Using her built-in internet connection, she was surprised at how easy it was to find out information that she would have thought highly classified. After only a few clicks and scrolls, ‘Barton’ surprisingly came up as a Professor Barton with his photo attached. His address was displayed in full on her left eye viewing screen, complete with Street View and printable route planner for added convenience.

30. The programmer

Barton's home was nothing special, located in a typical suburban tree-lined street. However, high-security cameras, razor-wire-topped fences and electric gates made his house stand out from the rest. Clearly, there were reasons why he needed this excessive protection. Perhaps he had many enemies, not just Madeline Bull.

He certainly had a lot of callers. Such was the extent of his popularity that it necessitated regular maintenance of the electric gates. Barton was obviously very well known in certain circles: probably mass murderers, kidnappers, rapists and drug barons, Madeline speculated.

The visitor's vehicles were mostly black, never red or blue or angelic white. Even the odd police car called on him. Most likely, filled with corrupt commissioners, chief detectives and other high-ranking people, Madeline speculated further.

There never seemed to be a dull moment in his household.

Madeline observed these events from an excellent vantage point, in Adam's Volvo, parked blatantly across the road in full view of the cameras. She found a zoom option for her precision optics which allowed her to zoom in on the keypad that operated the electric gates. The code had been noted for future reference. Most visitors used the intercom to gain access but a chosen few used the keypad.

She was comfortable in Adam's roomy car. It was easy to drive and relaxing to sit in and watch the world go by. Hours were swallowed up listening to classical music on the radio, there was no particular rush. She never used to like the classical genre, Mozart, Bach and all that, but now the slower-paced music had grown on her. Maybe this whole new life was maturing her and… *ageing her?* She hoped not.

For two days, she sat in her comfortable surroundings, not leaving the car, not getting out to spend a penny, buy chocolate, a bag of chips or even a can of pop. After all, she was completely self-sufficient and could stay in this same spot until she needed a recharge. Without any activity, this could be several weeks. When she got bored with the radio she turned to her internal systems and watched television or surfed the internet. She concluded that stalking Barton's house was certainly a step up from sitting in the stuffy 'Black Bull' next to that

noisy one-armed bandit.

However, all this aside, two days was long enough. Loneliness was setting in. Perhaps it was a good time to call on Barton and kill him.

Thanks to his high-definition security cameras, Barton was well aware that Madeline was parked outside his home stalking him. He knew that no matter how well protected he was, Madeline had the capability of breaching his high-tech security and his extremely expensive gates. Barton was the best one to know all this because he more or less designed her.

Madeline was playing cat and mouse with him and she had been designed to be the cat at all times. This was her objective, to unnerve him and make him uncomfortable in his own home. She wanted the satisfaction of knowing that there was absolutely nothing Barton could do about it. Madeline was, after all, an assassin, a walking talking lethal weapon and when she wasn't on your side it was very bad news indeed.

The wonderful twist of fate that Adam was still alive, however, slightly mitigated Madeline's desire for revenge. True, he had been shot a couple of times but the ones who did the deeds were now blocking up a ditch somewhere. She carefully mulled over the reasons for killing Barton. Evidently, he was instrumental in Brownsword's death, even if not by his own hands. The newspaper article said that he had been found naked with two bullet holes in his head. This had all the hallmarks of the two thugs, following instructions on a piece of paper, no doubt written by Barton! Maybe Barton had Brownsword killed for being an objectionable, pompous bully and in that light, she could partly forgive him. Perhaps then, a damn good slap across the face would be a sufficient punishment. She reminded herself that everything incriminating Barton was circumstantial but his name *was* stored on that mobile phone. Thankfully she had not lost sight of the fact that death can be a very permanent thing. Most likely, Barton had a wife and several sweet little children. How awful for them to lose a husband and a father.

She concluded that it was the ambience of Adam's car that was having a calming effect on her soul, 'Perhaps this was a good thing,' she thought. If she did go ahead with the assassination, (assassination sounded more palatable than kill) she would first of all have to leave the sanctuary of the car. Then she would have to open the gates, probably get shot at a few times, get her clothes dirty, possibly ripped by angry dogs and then have to be really nasty to someone, namely Barton. Being nasty to someone who used to be a friend called Chris Reynolds could be challenging. She had to charge up her negative

feelings again. Think of how Adam screamed with pain, remind herself how she was inhumanely tethered in that van and of course, not forgetting the death of poor old Sid, the night watchman.

Then her mind wandered. Perhaps a good old chat with Barton would be a better course of action. Find out the root cause of his odd behaviour and recommend a good therapist.

No, it was overdue, she had to get out of the car and go and kill him.

It was precisely at this moment when a dark figure, heavily tapped on the car side window. All her old instincts made her jump in fright, scramble to start the engine and engage first gear for a hasty getaway, but in the nick of time her new instincts kicked in.

'Madeline, Madeline Bull…' she heard him say just before the noise of the car's engine drowned out the rest of what he had to say. It was another voice that she recognised, another voice that used to have concern and care attached to it. Before she had a chance to let the clutch out, Madeline had homed in on the voice and identified it.

It was Rob Hogarth, the programmer for the Mad Bull project. His face was in darkness but identified by his tall, weedy frame, hunched at the shoulders. He had a piece of paper in his hand which he covertly offered to her. Sticking to her present policy of trusting no one, she lowered her window by half an inch, just enough for him to pass the message through to her, it read:

Go to menu, then tools,
Select monitoring,
Select security,
Select voice key,
Select relay,
Type in 'RH',
Select disable,
Untick video and audio,
Click apply,

Then pick me up around the corner, first left.

Madeline followed the rather complex instructions. There was no obvious reason why she shouldn't. She was clueless as to what it all meant, but she was sure there was a good reason for it all.

She cautiously welcomed Hogarth into her car.

'Did you follow the instructions?' asked Hogarth, anxiously.

'Yes!'

'You clicked on *apply*?'

‘Yes, yes, yes. What exactly have I recklessly and foolishly done to myself?’

‘You’re now running on sanctuary mode which means you have no peeping toms or onlookers. You’ve engaged a feature you’re not supposed to know about.’

‘You mean, no one can monitor me, no one can hear or see what I’m doing?’ Madeline chirped.

‘That’s right, you’re completely private and on your own. Now you can do whatever you want without anyone prying.’

Madeline was unsure about this sudden isolation and compared it to losing her conscience, her inner voice. However, since the death of Brownsword, she was unclear if there *was* anyone actually ‘listening in’. Now she almost welcomed onlookers, they stopped her from feeling alone.

‘Why would I want to go private?’

‘Because I don’t want anyone to know I’m with you.’

‘Why’s that?’ asked Madeline tentatively.

‘Because I want to live!’

It seemed a reasonable argument and besides, Madeline was ready for a bit of company. Hogarth wasn’t exactly who she had in mind, but he would do for now. His weak frame shivered from the chill of the evening air which had followed him into the car. Madeline had no need for warmth. The engine hadn’t run for days so the interior was exactly the same temperature as the exterior. To her it was cosy, to Hogarth, it was an icebox. Madeline considered Hogarth as someone she could trust and confide in. She gave him a peck on his cheek. This seemed the right thing to do.

‘First things first, my real name is Ron, Ron Poultney. Never did like Ron or Poultney, much preferred Rob and Hogarth, but there you go, Ron, it is. Anyway, good to see you, how the devil are you? Everything okay with your new body?’ Ron paused for breath, not allowing Madeline to interrupt. ‘Coping with it alright? I think we ought to put some distance between us and Barton.’

This was a pleasant change, someone asking how she was, how her new body was and being genuinely concerned. She accepted that it was a good thing that not many people knew about the Mad Bull project. It used to be five people, not counting the two surgeons (*they were probably hypnotised afterwards, to forget everything*). Now it was down to a mere four. Only four people in the whole world who could

be concerned and ask these questions, and fix her if she went wrong. Not exactly an army of backup technicians.

She drove off, leaving behind the street that she had become so familiar with. She had no idea where she was going, but that was all right because Ron did.

Although Ron had posed many considerate questions, a simple reply would do for all of them,

'I'm OK… Ron, coping fine, thanks for asking.'

To be honest, Ron Poultney was a far more fitting name for him than Rob Hogarth. His frail appearance had always contrasted significantly with the other scientists. His mannerisms made him look far older than he probably was. He dressed sedately to suit this premature ageing. With leather patches on the elbows of his ageing tweed jacket and baggy brown corduroy trousers, he wasn't the height of fashion. Undoubtedly a genius, an accredited boffin definitely, but he always came across as dull and insular, perhaps not the ideal person to help Madeline. For now, though, he would have to do.

'You know about Barton then?' asked Madeline.

'What in particular?'

'Brownsword, better known as Turner, for a start,' said Madeline.

'Brownsword was tortured before he died you know. He wouldn't have given anything away about you. The project meant everything to him,' said Ron.

'We had our moments, but a brave man. They tried to kill my boyfriend, Adam as well, you know,' said Madeline

'Now you know what those strict conditions and protocols were for.'

'Yes, I realise now,' said Madeline humbly knowing that she had irresponsibly broken her pact, not that she would have done anything differently.

'Anyway, we're invisible now, even to Barton, that's all that matters,' said Ron as he settled comfortably into the leather passenger seat of the trusty old Volvo.

'So, Madeline the feisty android, all second nature now, I imagine? To be honest, when you first inhabited the MB3 receptor, moved in as it were, we all had our doubts. We didn't think you'd go the distance.'

'Well, I have done, I 'm not the sort to give in lightly,' said Madeline curtly.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way… No, I’m pleased and proud of you,’ said Ron.

Madeline realised she was behaving defensively and accepted that what he said was no more than genuine praise. She recanted and changed her flow.

‘I have to think hard now to realise that I’m in a tank and this body, receptor as you call it, isn’t me. It is very strange, but wonderful, a credit to all of you.’

Ron gave a smile of satisfaction as Madeline went through a rapid process of moving each part of her body to demonstrate her affiliation with technology.

It was time to ask him an overdue question, ‘Incidentally, how did you manage to find me?’ asked Madeline perkily.

‘You have an IP address. You are linked to the internet, well you were until sanctuary mode was engaged. With the right username and password, anyone could access your system, hear what you hear and see what you see. Basically, you were a walking, talking, webcam with attitude. We used to use it to monitor you in the early days but more recently it’s what Brownsword used to watch over you.’ Ron explained.

‘Poor old Brownsword…’ said Madeline with newly revised sympathy and then changed to a more austere tone. ‘So, you’ve been nosing in on my website, then?’

‘Well, yes, occasionally, I can’t deny it. I have to say, you’ve been up to quite a lot, these last twelve months, haven’t you?’

Madeline forced a smile but didn’t particularly like this intrusion one little bit. Brownsword alias Turner, yes, she had accepted him. He may have been a pompous bully but she tolerated him and adopted him as the chosen onlooker. Now, she missed him more than she ever thought she would. Anyone else having so much as a peep was a pervert. She uncomfortably became conscious of her revealing top and short skirt and pointlessly squeezed her legs together. Ron realised the possible implications of what he had just said and how it might have come across. He had to put things into perspective.

‘That came out all wrong, didn’t it? I’m afraid it’s something you have just got to live with. You are unique but crucially you are extremely complex. Monitoring is essential to ensure you keep functioning properly. I haven’t been watching you every second of the day if that’s what you’re worried about and certainly not during your personal and private moments. I’m not a creep you know.’

Madeline was not particularly convinced, but this aside, at least Ron was friendly company. She changed the subject,

'Okay, what else has been kept from me then? Things I can do that I was never told about? Turner just said, read the help files.'

'Exactly, nothing's has been kept from you, it *is* all there in the help files. OK, let me think… Alright, pull over, I think we're pretty safe now.' said Ron.

Madeline found a lay-by, pulled in and stopped the car.

'Something you can try: Click on *'tools'* again… OK? Now click on '*Surveillance*'. It should now say '*Sanctuary mode'*. Now click on *'third eye'*. You should now have a few choices, click on *'lab cam'*.

Immediately, in the sight of Madeline's left eye was a bird's eye view of the laboratory, her *real* home.

'The lab, I don't believe it, and my tank!' exclaimed Madeline. 'I wish I'd known about this feature earlier.'

It was all there to see: her real home, her stainless-steel tank, the bloodstains on the floor where Adam was shot, the door to the backup power supply and the monitor screen on the wall. All was silent and still and certainly for Madeline, a comforting sight.

'Can you see anyone?' said Ron.

'No, thank goodness.'

'I'm just asking because if there had been someone there, you could have used your mole to control the crosshair in your view and take a pot shot at them. It was provided so that you can protect your *real* self. Now, if you click on *'alert'* at the bottom of your picture you will go back to normal view but you will be…'

'Alerted if I get any visitors,' said Madeline.

'Exactly! Thought of everything don't you think?'

In her defence, she never read instructions or help notes, just muddled through. 'Besides,' she thought, 'when have help notes ever been helpful?'

Ron was doing his level best to put Madeline at ease and it was working. She reminisced about the days in the lab when she was pampered by the scientists. How they encouraged and comforted her until finally, she was at one with her new self. Rob Hogarth was one of these scientists and now his name was Ron.

It was a very stressful business being an android, being an assassin

and being in two places at once. Madeline knew full well how temperamental technical things can be. Fortunately, her new body had proved completely reliable despite a considerable amount of rough treatment from things such as bullets, fire and angle grinders. It could have been different, though. A million and one things could have gone wrong like a bad connection, leaky pipe or a failure of any one of the thousands of parts that made her android-body work. Adam was technically minded, could change a fuse, a spark plug, open a combination lock, even fill up a vending machine, but as much as Madeline loved him, her new body was out of bounds from Adam's toolbox and his grubby socket set. On the other hand, she assumed Ron knew precisely how she worked. So, within reason, with her permission, he would be allowed to tamper with some of her parts. However, other parts of her perfect body would always be out of bounds to everyone but Adam.

Ron insisted on nattering on about the Mad Bull project and how Poppy was wired up and became *Mad*. Madeline hated the shortened version of her new name, it wasn't a proper name, so every time Ron said *Mad*, she would sternly correct him with *Madeline*. She lost count of how many times she said 'really?' and 'Yes, I know, I was there,' but accepted that she had no choice but to endure Ron's long and detailed account of the project. It was clearly the most exciting, challenging thing Ron had ever done in his entire life and he was very proud of it.

The last thing Madeline wanted to be was rude and ungrateful but unfortunately, she had to move on. Ron lost all sense of time, he would have been happy to sit there in the passenger seat until the rain-soaked pavements dried out and the sun began to rise in the east.

'Ron, I'm sorry to interrupt your flow but I need to find Adam. He was shot in his legs by two mindless thugs – both justifiably dead now, I might add. The police have taken him somewhere but they won't tell me where.'

'Poor chap, the pain must have been dreadful. Well, all I can say is, once again you haven't been using your talents to the full, have you?'

'Don't tell me, is this going to be something else I should have read up about?'

'Well, yes, didn't it occur to you how easily you found Barton's address despite it being highly restricted information?'

'I did think it was a little odd at the time.'

'You happen to have unrestricted access to virtually every database known to man. Apparently, it required a special dispensation from the

Home Office. Just shows how important the Mad Bull project was.'

'Was? Still is! Madeline Bull is still going strong. One or two knockbacks, but still very much alive and kicking! OK, how exactly is information on a secret database going to help me find Adam?' asked Madeline.

'Ever heard of the National Health Service database? You have unrestricted access to it. Try typing his name in. You never know, it might tell you which hospital, which ward and what treatment he's having… perhaps even tell you what colour pyjamas he's wearing, but that's just a suggestion,' said Ron.

Databases can be amazingly useful things. However, only the very privileged few have access to them, so on the whole, they are pretty useless to ordinary people. Then again, because of the highly personal, sensitive and secretive matters that can be contained in these databases, it is probably best that most people don't have access to them. It was requested that Madeline Bull be given unhindered access to virtually all known databases for supportive reasons. It was thought that the available information may, from time to time, help in her demanding missions. Because of the severely limited number of people who knew about the Mad Bull project, special dispensation from the Home Office was given through bribes and favours more than anything above board and official. Unfortunately, at the eleventh hour, it was decided that certain information was far too sensitive and personal to be accessed by just anyone. However, when it was revealed that Madeline Bull wasn't just anyone, *she wasn't anyone at all,* she was an android, permission was fully given.

Madeline was becoming a dab hand at finding her way around complex internet sites. The National Health Service databases, normally blocked to the general public, were accessed with a few clicks. There were two NHS databases to go at, 'the central registry' and 'the patient admissions registry'. Madeline filled in all the relevant boxes on the admissions registry page and almost instantly, Adam's whereabouts were displayed:

Royal Berkshire, Secure Ward 6, Bed 3, Pyjama colour: Navy.

31. Explosive Motion

Poppy had never been one to engage herself in philosophical thoughts and Madeline was no exception either. However, she was and always would be extremely grateful for what the genius of mankind and the wonders of science had done for her. What *had* been done to her was beyond her wildest imaginings and difficult to take in. What she *could* take in was her new start in life, fashioned particularly with perfection in mind. She openly flaunted what any level-headed, well balanced, perfectly respectable person would sell their very soul for at some time in their life.

Ron also appreciated the marvel of this creation called Madeline, as he sat in the passenger seat with an uninterrupted view of her. He couldn't help but notice her long, silky, shapely legs that started ridiculously close to her slim waist and kept on going all the way down to the pedals. He also noticed her perfectly formed chest with the seat belt tightly pressed against it. It wasn't as if he hadn't seen Madeline before, in fact, he knew just about every intricate part of Madeline Bull, the machine. However now Madeline Bull was completely alive and improved, thanks to the intervention of Poppy and the American scientists. What essentially was a collection of man-made materials and computer chips, was now far, far more than the sum of *its* parts. The machine that he had helped to build was oozing with life, completely overrun with character, feelings, expressions, and well and truly female. In fairness, Ron wasn't perving, he was admiring – a subtle difference and something that Madeline noted and appreciated.

It has to be said (again) that the Madeline Bull project was colossally expensive and extraordinarily complex, with Poppy being the first to benefit from this incredible technology. Likewise, many everyday devices that are now taken for granted also had a very expensive, complex and singular beginning – mobile phones, computers, cars and televisions, for example. However, now that these consumables are produced in their billions, they have become relatively inexpensive and significantly improved. Madeline wondered if one day, in the not-too-distant future, the same would apply to her technology. For a modest fortune, you could be put in a tank and connected up to a Madeline (or John) Bull and once again reap the rewards of being

youthful.

Ron watched as Madeline drove effortlessly with her artificial body. No one would ever suspect that she was anything but human. He knew she wasn't human but every fibre of his being told him that he was mistaken, she had to be human. That perfectly textured and gently tanned flesh that Madeline was showing an awful lot of was silicone. That thick lustrous blonde hair, draped over her perfectly formed shoulders was nylon. This aside, she was more human than a lot of humans he knew.

To be more accurate, her hair was no longer made of mundane nylon fibres. The American scientists had replaced it with some space-age material with lots of polys, fluoras and tetras in it. They had no choice but to replace it because they had viciously cut off her original hair and then accidentally trodden on it. This new hair was far superior, it could withstand a good dowsing of heat, drizzly rain and the cheapest of shampoos without going all frizzy and unmanageable.

'You are all geniuses, you know, you and the others. My body is pretty amazing, isn't it?' said Madeline bringing the short, awkward silence to an end.

'What! Sorry?' Ron snapped out of his transfixion.

'I noticed you admiring your work. You did a good job… in building me.'

'I suppose we did, didn't we?' said Ron.

'You know, there's one thing no one told me and I never thought it prudent to ask, but how long can I exist like this?' asked Madeline.

'Well, I don't know exactly what the American counterparts did to you, but *our* Madeline Bull was engineered to last a lifetime.'

That's all Ron would say, he knew it wasn't the precise answer to her question, but he wasn't qualified to give any other. She had no doubts that her artificial body would last a very long time and if it went wrong it could most likely be fixed, especially, now that she was reacquainted with Ron. Obviously, Madeline was referring to her own, Poppy body. She wisely let the question drop. Try as she could, she couldn't forget the state her real body was in when it went into the tank. She had heard certain phrases bandied about like atrophy, pressure sores and gangrene, assuming that they would be the penalties of such an immobile existence. However, she felt wonderful, she was pain-free and above all, she was alive.

Ron knew, full well, the implications of her question. He knew the importance of being discreet when it had anything to do with the state

of Poppy Cock.

The Royal Berkshire hospital was several miles away but the journey passed quickly, especially for Ron. Madeline found it hard to get a word in edgeways. She could never forget that being a humanoid forged a very lonely existence. Consequently, good company was always appreciated.

Why Adam had been taken to this particular hospital was most likely because it had a high-security ward, complete with security guards. Hopefully, the likes of Professor Barton and his corrupt circle of associates would find it impenetrable. Then again, perhaps it had nothing to do with Barton, perhaps it was all down to Detective Stoddard's prudent choosing.

As it turned out, the security in this high-security hospital was apparently non-existent or at least well concealed. Once the usual white lab coats were donned, they found that they could go virtually anywhere without as much as a glance from anyone. Initially, Madeline had her mind set on acquiring and wearing a nurse's outfit but this had its drawbacks: A suitably slim nurse would have to be located and then persuaded to part with her clothing. Then hems would then have to be substantially taken up, breasts inflated and cleavage exposed. Ron had to talk her down from acquiring the 'saucy nurse' look. It was just a tad too problematical, too time-consuming and on Madeline Bull's body, blatantly provocative. A simple white coat would do just fine.

They knew exactly where Adam was and how to get there. The doctors, nurses and porters were all far too busy to stop them and ask any awkward questions. It seemed too good to be true and it was, a message abruptly grated out of the hospital PA system:

'Could Madeline Bull report to main reception immediately please?'

Madeline stopped in her tracks.

'You're not going, are you!?' snapped Ron, notably concerned.

'I have to, you never know, it could be important.'

'Important? How the hell could it be important? It's got to be a trap,' Ron protested.

'Probably is and if it is, it's pretty obvious who's trying to set it.'

Madeline scurried down the corridors, following the "reception" signs. Ron followed, grumbling and noticeably limping as he went. Finally, they reached the reception desk with a surly-looking female

receptionist standing behind it.

‘I’m Doctor… Bull, you called me on the P.A.?’ questioned Madeline, acting out the part although not particularly looking the part.

The receptionist justifiably stared at various bits of Dr Bull. Her incredulous appearance was more akin to a stripper-gram than that of an orderly-looking hospital professional.

‘Oh, yes… Doctor. I have a call for you. Can you take it here?’

Madeline knew exactly who it was well before ear and earpiece came together.

‘Hello Bull speaking.’

‘Hello Madeline, I had a premonition you’d be at the hospital. I assure you, Adam is perfectly safe where he is. I advise you to leave him there, if you take him out, you’ll be putting him in great danger. By the way, I have someone watching over your mother, I know you’d never forgive yourself if any harm came to her,’ said Barton, finishing off solemnly.

Madeline cupped the receiver and turned to Ron. Her facial expressions were fairly limited, being of android construction, but as it happened, very concerned, was one she could do well.

‘It’s Barton, he’s using my mother to intimidate me!’

Ron seemed completely unsurprised, almost as if he’d expected this to be Barton’s next move. Barton seemed to hold all the aces; Adam and now Poppy’s mother. The prospects were certainly grim. Madeline was well and truly checkmated. Ron, however, knew a way of retaliating. He whispered in Madeline’s spare ear.

‘Barton has a young daughter, Lauren.’

It took a second or two for Madeline to realise exactly why Ron was gracing her with this untimely bit of trivia, but then the penny dropped. She un-cupped the receiver and delivered a return blow.

‘Lay a hand on my mother or cause any more harm my Adam and I swear your daughter, Lauren, will have nightmares for the rest of her life, is that clear?’ said Madeline with the sternest tone. She hoped Barton had a soft spot for his daughter if no one else.

‘Poultney, is he with you…?’

That’s all Barton had a chance to say before Madeline abruptly cut him off. On reflection, threats were something she wasn’t at all comfortable with. It did seem though, that this particular threat shook the ground he stood on, judging by his last few trembling words.

‘Excellent, you’re learning, not exactly at rocket speed, but you’re learning,’ Ron complimented Madeline and continued. ‘Come on, we better hurry up and find your Boyfriend, I have a strong feeling I know what Barton’s next move will be!’

Madeline wondered if her inbuilt sat-nav would have helped through the endless corridors and flights of stairs. It seemed as though they were walking for miles even though it looked quite a modest-sized hospital building from the outside. With every step, Madeline grew more apprehensive and more excited at the thought of seeing Adam again.

They expected to find at least one-armed police officer outside Ward 6 where Adam was secured, but the coast was clear. Evidently, the presence of security staff had been bypassed in favour of a heavy reinforced locked door which was most likely alarmed and electrified.

Madeline’s heart raced as she glanced through the small window in the door. Adam was there, standing at the far window with the help of two crutches. Tears of joy formed in both Poppy’s and Madeline’s eyes. No doubt he was hungering for the outside world, a double cheeseburger and his fiancé, Poppy – now taking the form of Madeline. He and several other patients turned in the direction of the tapping sound coming from the small window in the heavy, securely locked door. As expected, many eyes met, but the most important ones to meet were Adam’s and Madeline’s. Madeline did her best to hide her android tears of joy but was dismally failing. Adam just smiled in that particular way that made Madeline melt inside. Tears inevitably overflowed down her perfect cheeks.

She frantically tried to persuade the door to open but she knew right from the start, that it was hopeless. Unless one of her arms had a feature, she didn’t know about, like being able to turn into a chainsaw, this door was going to succeed in keeping them apart.

‘Ron, we have to get the keys, we have to!’

‘There’s no time, I suspect Barton will have alerted the staff, they’ll be here any moment. Madeline, have you discovered your explosive motion yet?’

‘Explosive what? No, of course, I haven’t! Is it anything to do with chainsaws?’

‘Your artificial muscles were set up when you were built to mimic human muscle characteristics. Because of this, they only operate at around 3% of their full capacity.’

‘You mean I’m sort of detuned?’

‘Seriously detuned. Mole at the ready: *Tools*… *Setup*… *Mobility*… *Muscles*, then select something other than normal setting,’ instructed Ron.

‘It goes up in levels, 3, okay?’

‘Yes, that should do fine.’

It was fortunate that he was the programmer for the Madeline Bull project and even more fortunate that he could remember such intricate details.

‘Hang on, right, OK, now what?’

‘That’s it, you’re now in *explosive-motion* mode, about ten times your normal strength. Might I suggest that you use the palms of your hands, not your clenched fist or you could rip the skin off your knuckles. And remember, the door may be electrified so expect some interference on your vision.’

Madeline wasn’t entirely convinced that her mole twiddling had made any difference but regardless, she attacked the door with both open hands. Unbelievably, one punch embossed two deep hand-shaped craters in the metal panel of the door. Not only that, the hinges had bent and the locks had loosened. Another punch was enough to force the door off its steel hinges. Everyone was impressed, most of all Madeline, despite regarding this as ill-treatment of her lovely, still mostly new body. She hoped she wouldn’t have to use this *explosive motion* feature too often. The alarm bells were now sounding and disturbing the peace and quiet of the secure ward. Time was now of the essence.

The ward was like any other hospital ward: six beds separated by no more than a dowdy coloured plastic curtain on a rail. Several uncomfortable tubular steel chairs, a fairly dated television in the corner and a scattering of medical instruments sufficed as the furnishings. All but Adam stared in disbelief at Madeline’s handy work. Adam had come to expect nothing less spectacular from his Madeline. He was, of course, delighted to see her, but slightly confused as to why she was about to break him out of a place designed primarily to protect him. But who was he to question the motives of his feisty girlfriend? With predictable eagerness, Madeline ran across to Adam, but unfortunately, with *explosive motion* still selected, her leg muscles turned a run into a gigantic hop, skip and jump. Madeline completely missed Adam, missed his bed and embedded herself, plaster deep, in the far wall, fortunately, narrowly missing a window. If she hadn’t missed the window, considering that the ward was on the fifth floor, Madeline would now be little more

than an expensive splat on the block paving below.

‘Perhaps that’s why you were not encouraged to use explosive motion,’ said Ron calmly.

Madeline immediately began to fiddle with her mole again.

‘What was it…? I know, tools, setup, mobility.’

She selected *normal*, returning her muscles to a ‘human’ level. The consequences of hugging and kissing Adam in explosive motion didn’t bear thinking about.

‘I suggest you reselect explosive motion, I think the security staff are approaching. You can grope each other later.’

‘Ron! You just sound like my dad.’

Ron clearly didn’t like the ‘dad’ bit but unfortunately, he was right. She hastily hugged Adam and then quickly twiddled her mole again.

How such a menacing collection of barbarians had been allowed to have free run of the hospital corridors was obviously down to some government minister getting High-Security Prison and High-Security Hospital papers mixed up. Six of them were now hurtling down the corridor toward the disturbance. Unfortunately, it was not going to be a good day for them. Madeline suggested that Ron and Adam took cover while she dealt with the situation. They had no intention of arguing with her but failed to see any of this so-called *cover* that they could take.

‘Madeline, the security staff are armed. Try not to annoy them too much. I know we’re in the best place if we *do* get shot but bullets damn well hurt!’ said Adam, remembering the pain vividly.

She carried the torment of knowing that it was solely because of her exuberance that he got shot twice, in the first place. With her newly discovered explosive motion, she was confident that she could easily take care of a handful of heavyweights entirely on her own. This was convenient as Adam’s injuries were still painful and debilitating. At best he could only walk with a limp and Ron was inherently weedy, and also limped. The other patients simply didn’t want to get involved. It was all down to Madeline and only Madeline. That’s the way she wanted it to be.

‘Sweetheart, forgive me, I may need to get a little violent here.’

She grabbed hold of a steel-framed chair. As it was completely over-engineered, it would hopefully, act as a shield and withstand any stray bullet. If need be, the tubular legs would make perfect lances.

For Adam and Ron (and the other four bemused patients in the room), it was almost too painful to watch. With explosive motion switched on, aptly named Mad Bull lived up to her name. She easily fought off all the six security staff, using no more than one chair and a bit of bad language. It was inevitable that a blunt chair leg would occasionally, impale their muscle-bound bodies, but this couldn't be helped. Undeniably, there was plenty of blood spilt and plenty of painful outbursts but on the bright side, they were in the right place to be treated afterwards. The security staff were all armed but despite their rough treatment and being completely outmatched, not a single bullet was fired. Their situation was hopeless from the start. Exactly what the guards were hoping to achieve was unclear. It may have been Madeline's imagination but she had the distinct feeling that she was just in the way and they were trying to get to someone else in the room. In less than a minute, all six security guards were reeling about on the floor in pain, in large pools of blood and calling out for a nurse. Ron appeared to faint.

At last, Madeline could fondle her mole and select 'normal' so she could throw her arms around Adam. In the short time that explosive motion had been active, she had partially adapted to her super-strength. Now back to normal, initially it was as though she was wading through butter, but by the time she had reached Adam the butter had softened and her heart was melting.

Adam behaved just as Madeline expected him to, unruffled, calm and composed. His wounds to his legs had been attended to, resulting in his left, being in a plaster cast and his right, modelling two sticking plasters: one at the front and one at the rear of his thigh.

'Not prepared to wait until visiting time then?' said Michael, calmly.

'You know me. Brought an old friend with me… Ron? Ron! Are you alright?'

Ron came around with a sudden jerk of embarrassment.

'Adam this is Ron, Ron Poultney, one of the scientists who built me. Ron this is Adam.'

Adam's heavy hand and Ron's limp hand met, coupled and waggled a couple of times. Then Madeline indulged in another, more intimate kind of ritual with Adam.

'Come on, let's get out of here and go and get some proper food,' said Adam decisively.

Once they had traversed the bloody mess of skewered security guards, the corridors were relatively clear barring the occasional nurse, porter

and visitor. Everyone seemed oblivious to a blood-spattered strippergram, a patient hobbling on crutches and a slightly limping, ashen-faced boffin called Ron. Adam found he could move reasonably quickly despite his tender and aching wounds. The thoughts of cheeseburgers and fries seemed to overcome his adversities. Within minutes, all three were seated in the Volvo in the hospital car park. Their white coats, one more red than white, had been discarded.

In the relative safety and obscurity of Adam's car, they calmly watched several police cars arrive. Many uniformed officers spilled out of the vehicles and poured into the hospital building. Unfortunately for them, the deed had been done and they were too late.

Madeline had opted to sit in the driving seat so she started the engine and calmly drove off the car park.

Over the past few days, Madeline's perfectly formed bottom had nicely moulded itself into the soft leather driver's seat, fooling her into thinking that it was actually her car. She would make a point of asking Adam for first refusal if he ever decided to sell it.

On the whole, it had been an easy rescue mission. True, there were a few casualties, six to be precise, but that was unavoidable. Madeline was pleased with herself and delighted that once more she was by Adam's side. Ron being a gooseberry in the back seat, decided to do the right thing and fall asleep while Adam and Madeline caught up with odds and ends.

'My world ended when I left you behind in the lab. What could have happened doesn't bear thinking about,' said Madeline.

'Well, fortunately, those two… morons were complete morons.'

'Dead morons,' Madeline added.

'You didn't!? Obviously, you did, stupid question. Anyway, they hadn't fastened me to the chair at all and my hands easily wriggled out of their Boy Scout knot.'

'What about the bomb?' asked Madeline.

'It took a while to get it off my arm, that brown parcel tape is deceptively strong!'

'Tell me about it!' said Madeline, knowing all about the versatility of brown parcel tape.

'I hobbled over to the lab doors and threw the bomb to the far end of the corridor. Just in the nick of time, I might add. It went off a couple of minutes later.'

‘God, my poor heroic Adam! I bet you were in agony?’

‘Yes, agony. Fortunately, one of the bullets went straight through the muscle, in and out, missing the thigh bone so I could still use that leg without too much pain. Mind you, by the time I’d crawled through that claustrophobic shaft up to the surface, I was in absolute agony. I must have passed out because the next thing I knew, I woke up in a hospital bed in that ward you’ve just removed me from.’

‘Just doing my job,’ said Madeline with a loving smile. ‘Let’s find a drive-in.’

32. An Aunt's hospitality

Three weeks later, Adam's bullet damaged legs were now as good as new apart from a couple of small battle scars.

Ron decided that a good place to stay would be at his Aunt Mabel's cottage, deep in the heart of the beautiful Brecon Beacons. It was a safe haven, hidden away in the folds of the dark Welsh mountains. Apparently, Aunt Mabel had lived there, all on her own since her husband died six years ago and seemed delighted to provide accommodation for her nephew and a couple of his friends. Company in her lonely albeit peaceful idyllic life, she welcomed with open arms.

Detached from her vocation as an assassin or serial killer, depending on your point of view, Madeline felt at home in Mabel's quaint country home. Concerns for her dear mother in evil Barton's custody were never far from her mind. Scum bag Barton was not off the hook by any means. The vulnerability and surrealism of her real body housed in that lonely tank, so far away, was also a cause for concern, but thanks to Ron, she now had a reassuring alert system. Madeline could actual describe herself as happy for the first time in over a year. She was with her sweetheart Adam, it was mid-May and her little inbuilt precision cameras were put through their paces, focusing on the beautiful surrounding countryside. She accepted that scents and fragrances were impossible to relay back to her real nose, but apart from that minor detail, everything else seemed completely real. Ron had his own matters to attend to, leaving Adam and Madeline to their own devices. This mainly involved indulging in romantic activities. Aunty Mabel was a wonderful host, making the stay at the cottage like a five-star holiday.

Most days, Ron would head into town in Aunty Mabel's old Morris Minor car. He insisted that Adam and Madeline remained in the vicinity of the village, off the radar and in the safety that the secret location provided. This they willingly did, using their time to indulge in picnics, walks, bike rides or simply staying in watching television. It was as close to paradise as they could possibly imagine.

As long as Madeline remained operating in 'sanctuary' mode, she was invisible and untraceable. Only three people in the world: Adam, Ron

and Aunt Mabel, knew where she was. True, Barton knew where her real body was but that was covered with her intruder alert system and the weapon attached to it. If Poppy did have any visitors, Barton, for one, inevitably they would have to be zapped at some time during their visit.

No one ever lost sight of the fact that Madeline was artificial. Even Aunt Mabel knew that there was something very inhuman about her, but never asked any awkward questions. Somehow, she knew not to force food or drink on her and to expect the occasional unusually stained underwear items in the dirty washing basket. Madeline scowled at the sight of Adam, night after night, enjoying the delights of Mabel's wonderful home cooking. The best she could enjoy was warm chicken soup sucked through a tube. She knew she would always be plagued with this cruel torment but there was nothing that could be done about it. She simply had to put up with it, be grateful for what she had and get on with her new privileged life.

There were other things she had to put up with which basically boiled down to being different in every way imaginable, from a normal human being. The countless walks they went on, through the picturesque countryside, exercised and rehabilitated Adam's legs. As a bonus, he also lost a stone in weight and gained a healthy complexion. However, in contrast, Madeline benefited very little from all this. She yearned for the smell of fresh air, longed for a drink of cool refreshing larger and found that she had to recharge herself far more often. Added to this, the excessive use of her system, her artificial muscles and joints, caused a few niggling faults and necessitated a premature service and oil change. Unfortunately, Ron couldn't fix her dissatisfaction, but at least he could sort out all her mechanical faults.

And so, it became a regular occurrence during the quiet evenings in the cosy living room of the cottage: Madeline's android body would be linked up to Ron's laptop for routine maintenance. Aunt Mabel would be busy knitting for Wales, oblivious to the fact that Madeline's big toe was plugged into a laptop. Adam would have his head deep in a novel and *Poppy* would be watching the regular television soaps. The evening then progressed to cocoa for three of them, courtesy of diligent Aunt Mabel and then the 'night, nights' started and people went to bed. This was always the best time for Adam and Madeline because Adam was male and Madeline was a sex goddess. No one gave a thought for poor old Ron as no one knew an awful lot about him. Even Aunt Mabel didn't offer to shed any light on her nephew.

Something else Ron couldn't fix was Madeline's well-being. There would be times when she would suffer from long-lasting dizzy spells,

accompanied by feelings of nausea. Thankfully, since she had become Madeline, for most of the time she had enjoyed good health and been pain-free. Originally, various intravenous drugs kept her this way, but more recently she had been drug-free. Now, these new feelings of sickness and dizziness were a real worry for her. She often wondered if her real body was becoming a big unhealthy fat blob, or worse, decaying into a shrivelled lump of skin and bone. She decided not to waste time worrying about any of this and put it down to a virus she'd *somehow* picked up while sealed inside her sterile tank. A more likely cause which she dismissed, was food poisoning from the unseen mush coming out of her feeding tube. Fortunately, her food, albeit limited in variety, fairly tasteless and unappetising was still copiously arriving when she sucked.

Madeline detested the feeding tube.

One particular day, a warm sunny one, a day certainly not to be wasted, Madeline and Adam decided to do something different, something memorable. Early one morning, they left behind the refuge of the cottage and its immediate surroundings and drove to a nearby seaside resort. A place called Barry Island was as good as anywhere – full of delights, golden sands, donkey rides and a FUNFAIR! Madeline was curious to see if her high-tech body could handle being thrown around on a fairground ride. It was as good a reason as any to experience the scary delights of the big dipper. It was, in hindsight, a reckless thing to do, even if the nauseous symptoms had abated during this special day. To actively encourage herself to vomit inside her tank was totally irresponsible. To put her new, precision, complex body, through unnatural G-forces and violent shaking was simply asking for trouble. However, the Madeline Bull body admirably held together, experiencing the event perfectly and wonderfully.

It was almost one of the best days of her life. A plethora of broad smiles, piercing screams and infectious laughs all happened on Madeline's perfect artificial face. This may have been equivalent to no more than a ride in a simulator for Poppy but for Madeline it was awesome. Exactly how, being fastened in a tank, she could experience the thrills of positive and negative G's, violent pitches and yaws, and the 'stomach in your mouth' feeling was beyond her, but nevertheless, she did. She continued to scream childishly until her electronic voice box overloaded. She hung on so tightly to Adam that the poor man suffered intense bruising to his upper arms.

After several more scary rides, it was time for the candy floss. Most likely, it glued up her insides, but it was worth it. The taste of flavoured sugar and the sensation of her chin, nose and lips all being

sticky were missing but her childhood memories filled in the gaps. Later it was time to lie on the beach, close to Adam, close to the waves and feel the warmth of the sun on the uncovered bits of her body. They talked:

'I don't think I've ever seen you this happy,' remarked Adam.

'Perhaps I appreciate things more now. Dare I say it, perhaps I used to take life far too much for granted.'

'You *are* remarkable you know. What you've gone through, the way you've coped. If anyone deserves a knighthood, it's my Poppy.'

'Thanks, but I don't know if I have handled it all that well. All I do know is that I'm extremely grateful. I owe everything to those scientists, even Barton I suppose, but he's still on my hit list.'

'You must be angry that all this has happened to you?'

'Not angry anymore. You know, when you have a career that specifically involves reporting from battle zones, parading yourself in front of madmen and surrounding yourself in other people's tragedies, you are always pushing your luck. Inevitably, one day you're going to get hurt. That was the risk I took, why I was a celebrity, why people made a special effort and tuned in to watch me. I was the metaphorical racing car driver. One day I was going to crash, I suppose everybody knew it… everybody apart from me.'

'And crash, you certainly did!' said Adam.

'I read about myself once in *Heat* magazine or it may have been *Hello*. Do you know how they described me? A bimbo with a silly name who entertained the public with world news. The bimbo bit, fair enough. My name, that was down to my parents, but, entertained?'

'Well, I suppose you did in a way. That was your way of doing it, you made news, entertaining,' said Adam.

'What are you saying, I turned horrendous human suffering into entertainment? Wars, tyranny, famine, earthquakes, typhoons, plagues, terrorism, all great viewing and good for the ratings?' said Madeline agitatedly and she then changed to a more sombre tone. 'let's face it. I deserved everything I got.'

'Don't be ridiculous, you simply made bad news more palatable. Look at it this way, most films, novels, dramas and even computer games are based on those negative elements of life. Take all that away and what would we have left?' asked Adam.

'Nice things. Fairground rides, romance and… rumpy-pumpy?' suggested Madeline.

‘I was wondering when you’d get on to that subject.’

The sand dunes became an excellent place to practice something that wasn’t violent and didn’t involve any kind of suffering. Several people discreetly tried not to watch. Several dogs came sniffing by and one or two seagulls swooped within inches of Adam's bare bottom. But the seagulls, the dogs and people moved on, letting them finish off their perfect day.

Appropriately, on the way back to the cottage, the song ‘*Perfect day’* was played on the car radio. Some of the lyrics troubled her.

33. The Motorcyclist

It was a week later, another Friday, another beautiful warm sunny day and they had been on a long wonderful walk. However, today was like no other. It came on suddenly as a wave of anxiety that flooded her spirit and alerted her to something being terribly wrong. She wasn't aware that she had any psychic abilities. She couldn't read tea leaves or palms or crystal balls, but nevertheless, this feeling was tangible. Adam suggested she was being paranoid, as men do.

He was wrong, she was right. Her worst fears were completely justified.

Normally, when they returned from a walk, cycle ride or run in the car, Mabel would be pottering in her cottage garden and Ron would be relaxing, sipping a can of larger on the garden patio. On this particular day, there was no sign of either of them, but surely, they were in. The Morris Minor was on the drive, and the front door was wide open. Adam was the first to enter the cottage.

'Hello! Ron, Mabel, we're back, I'll put the kettle on!' he called out.

There was no reply for a very good reason. In the living room, he found a large pool of blood with Ron and Mabel in the centre of it.

Madeline was used to gore, blood and death, but this was a complete shock. Her intuition had been right, she screamed out their names in disbelief. They were motionless and appeared to have both been shot. Two of the most caring people Madeline had ever known (apart from her Mum and a few dozen other people), were lying dead in a pool of blood.

At that moment, the phone began to ring. Madeline picked up the handset but said nothing.

'Hello, who is this? Hello!' said the voice on the other end of the line.

It was a familiar voice that spewed out of the receiver. Madeline recognised it immediately.

'Barton, you hateful monster! Do you get a kick out of this?' Madeline seethed.

'Madeline, is that you? Is Adam with you? I've been trying to locate you for weeks.'

‘Thanks to Ron, I’ve been in sanctuary mode so you couldn’t find me, but clearly, now you have. How did you get this number?’ said Madeline as calmly as she could.

‘Someone phoned me from the number you’re speaking on. No one spoke and then hung up. It had to be Poultney, he knows my number.’

‘Why, on earth, would Ron do that? He was protecting us, but, as you know, now he’s dead, along with Mabel,’ growled Madeline.

Barton went deathly quiet for a few seconds.

‘Madeline, did you say Poultney’s dead? Are you sure? The bastard can’t die yet!’

‘Now let me see… He’s motionless, with a bullet hole in his trousers, a gash on his forehead and he’s lying in a pool of blood. Yes, I think he’s dead.’

‘I’m sending the police. They’ve traced your address from the phone number. They should be there shortly. One thing you should know, Poultney is an amp…’

A little impetuous, a little premature, but once again, Madeline cut Barton short and abruptly ended the call.

While Madeline had been talking to Barton, Adam had found the murder weapon, a small handgun. The urge to pick it up and examine it was overwhelming, so that’s exactly what he did.

‘Barton’s dropped us right in it. The police are on their way, and guess who are going to be the prime suspects?’ said Madeline, resisting the urge to go into full panic mode.

‘Shit! And I’ve picked up the damn gun, my fingerprints will be on it now!’ cursed Adam.

Instinctively, he threw the gun down. Unfortunately, it hit the corner of the hearth in such a way that it fired again, shooting Madeline in her toe – the one with the USB socket in it.

‘Oh well, no Ron, no need for my USB toe,’ Madeline sighed.

Of course, Madeline didn’t scream ‘ouch’ or ‘shit’ or ‘fuck’ because it didn’t hurt, it just made a small mess of one of her beautifully engineered toes. She wouldn’t even have to hobble like a human would after having had a toe blasted with a close-range bullet. However, Madeline’s superficial injury was not the main concern, it was how Adam would now handle his carelessness. He had handled the gun, daubing his fingerprints all over it and then inadvertently shot his girlfriend at point-blank range.

‘Sorry.’ said Adam, sheepishly.

‘Come on birdbrain, you better wipe that gun or no doubt, you’ll be the prime suspect.’ said Madeline, forgivingly.

It was about at this moment that a moan and a groan came roughly from the direction of Ron’s motionless corpse. The previously dead body stirred and attempted to raise itself from the floor.

‘Ron!’ shrieked Madeline. ‘You’re not dead! … Careful, you’ve got a nasty bullet wound in your leg.’

Ron sat himself up in the pool of blood and carefully raised his trouser leg – the one with the bullet hole in it. It was a complete shock. Adam and Madeline were unexpectedly presented with the sight of a prosthetic leg previously hiding away under the brown corduroy material of Ron’s trousers. Madeline could do some amazing tricks with her body, but this topped the lot.

‘*He* shot me in the leg. It gave way and I fell and hit my head on the fireplace,’ explained Ron.

‘*Who* shot you? …Did you get a look at him?’ asked Madeline.

‘A motorcyclist wearing full leathers barged in. “You’ve got this coming,” he shouted then he shot us. Lucky for me, he shot me in my false leg,’ recounted Ron.

‘Barton has just been on the phone,’ said Madeline. ‘He’s told the police; they’ll be here any minute.’

‘How did he get this number?’ asked Ron.

‘He said someone rang him from here. He suggested it may have been you?’ probed Madeline.

‘What the hell is that man up to? I used to think Barton was a guy you could trust with your life,’ grunted Ron.

‘Tell me about it!’ said Madeline.

‘Sadly, it seems that Mabel wasn’t as lucky as you, she’s dead,’ said Adam sympathetically.

Ron looked at his aunt’s face and the four bullet wounds to her chest that had collectively provided the pool of blood that he had bathed in. Her face was filled with horror and both eyes were eerily frozen firmly open. He gently and caringly lowered her eyelids. Ron now turned to the prosthetic section of his leg, strapping it as best as he could to his stump. It was clearly damaged but hopefully, it would still bear his modest weight. He managed to get to his feet unaided and found that it adequately supported him. A quick hobble around the lounge

sufficed as a test for his makeshift repair. This obvious embarrassment with his false leg coupled with a rather nasty head wound didn't prevent him from thinking clearly enough to make a rather obvious and overdue suggestion,

'I think we ought to make tracks and sharpish!'

They had no choice but to leave Aunt Mabel precisely where she lay in the pool of blood. It was so unfitting to leave a kind, caring Aunt Mabel in this state. She had done nothing to deserve this, nothing at all. She was a victim of circumstance who would hopefully now rejoin her husband in a far more peaceful place.

They all piled into Adam's car. Madeline opted to drive as usual. Moments later they were speeding down the narrow country lane. Ron was a bloody mess but it would eventually dry, turning more brownish as blood does, blending in well with the colour of his corduroy trousers.

'Pull in over there!' shouted Ron, from the back seat.

Madeline did an emergency stop and reversed some distance into a secluded farm track away from the road. True to Barton's word, he had called the police. Four police cars in convoy, shortly sped past them, sirens wailing and lights blazing. Adam and Ron crouched down as they passed.

'Bloody hell, that was close!' blurted Adam.

'Too close!' said Madeline. 'So, where to now?'

'Don't worry, I've got this covered. There's somewhere else we can stay. Just follow the road for a few miles, I'll tell you when to turn,' said Ron calmly.

While at Mabel's cottage, Adam, Madeline and Ron had spent many an evening in lively conversation. When there was absolutely nothing on the television, which was more often than not, a good, sometimes heated debate consumed the evening quite nicely. Anything from UFOs, ghosts, life after death to conspiracy theories had been thrashed out in front of the roaring log fire. Now, things had turned a page. Amongst other things, they had discovered that Ron had a false leg. Adam and Madeline had suspected for a while that something wasn't quite right with Ron's left leg. They had come to the wrong conclusion that he had a gammy knee.

Perhaps this was not his only deception. Perhaps there were other things he was keeping close to his chest. Certainly, over the last few weeks, he had come across as respectable and genuine, but on further inspection, his recent version of events didn't quite ring true. As it

happened, there were three anomalies that Madeline and Adam were particularly concerned about: Firstly, how very fortunate that he had only been shot once in his false bit of leg and nowhere else. Mabel however, had been shot four times in the chest. Secondly, why was the gun left openly at the scene of the crime and thirdly, if Barton did indeed receive a phone call from the cottage, who was it who rang him?

Something definitely didn't smell right. True, Barton could have found the cottage phone number by some other means and then simply called to irritate Ron and confuse Madeline. The gun could have been left at the scene of the crime with the intention that Adam would pick it up, put his fingerprints on it and incriminate himself – which he did. It was also perfectly possible that Ron had been exceptionally lucky with the destination of that *single* bullet.

These anomalies quickly brought on a new sense of doubt. Could Ron's benevolence over the past few weeks have been by design, to intentionally cloud Madeline's and Adam's judgement?

Suddenly Madeline realised what Barton was attempting to tell her before she hastily hung up on him. He was about to say that Ron was an amp*utee*. A sickly feeling developed in Madeline's own stomach many miles away. Just possibly, she may have made a serious lack of judgement.

It was time to give the thumbscrews a turn.

'Lucky, back there with that bullet, eh Ron?' suggested Madeline.

'Unbelievably lucky,' added Adam.

'What was the gunman like again?' asked Madeline.

'I told you, a motorcyclist in full gear!' snapped Ron.

'Did you get a look at him?' asked Adam

'It all happened so quickly,' said Ron.

'Well, was he wearing a helmet or not?' badgered Madeline.

'Of course, he was! What are you getting at?' Ron retorted, clearly getting flustered.

'How did it happen then… your leg?' asked Adam.

'In hospital, it happened in hospital,' said Ron quietly and with conviction.

After the bombardment of questions, Ron thought it best to provide them with an explanation. He proceeded to tell them the long-awaited

story of his past life:

He joined the army when he was eighteen and after three years of intensive training, proudly became a green berry in the Royal Marines. His first and only post was in Afghanistan. As is the fate of many who serve Queen and country, before he knew it, he was on the front line being fired upon from all directions with no shelter, inadequate equipment and no backup. Unfortunately, he and his detachment were mistaken for members of the insurgence and were promptly fired upon by an American drone. All were hit by the blast. However, despite horrendous injuries, only one person survived – Captain Ron Poultney. They flew him back to England to a hospital where, to add to his other disorders, he promptly contracted MRSA. The blast wounds eventually healed, in a fashion, but the veracious MRSA took his lower leg for deserts. He was left with a weak, painful, broken body and an incomplete leg.

Because it was classed as a *friendly fire* incident, there was a major cover-up. Consequently, there was no compensation paid for his suffering or even recognition of devoted service to his Queen and country. He was basically on the scrap heap of life in his middle twenties. He did his best to put this terrible chapter behind him and got on with what was left of his life.

He decided to pursue his almost insatiable interests in computer programming, for one day he knew he would take retribution.

'…They kicked me out of the army, no job, disabled, no money, nothing! But heh, they gave me a complimentary medal, wow, a bloody worthless medal. Do you know where the medal was made? Fucking China!' Ron continued on the same bitter note. 'You know what infuriates me the most? Afghanistan, never spent a single bullet out there, never squeezed the trigger once.'

'Certainly made up for it now though, haven't you Ron?' suggested Madeline, brazenly fishing for a reaction.

Ron wasn't going to rise to this blatant insinuation and wisely entered into a silent period, mainly to try and calm himself down. His mind was awash with bitterness and anger. Against impossible odds, he was determined to enjoy the journey. It was, after all, a beautiful day, the views of the countryside were breathtaking and things were *probably* going according to *his* plan!

Madeline didn't like the silence and didn't particularly like not knowing where they were going. It was time to ask another rather general sort of question,

'Ron, what exactly is going on?'

Ron remained tight-lipped which effectively told her that something was going on.

'That wasn't your aunt, was it?' Madeline daringly suggested.

Ron remained silent so Madeline continued with her questioning.

'I'll tell you what I'm thinking: Obviously, *you* didn't phone Barton, and we certainly didn't, that only leaves one person: Mabel. You caught her in the act on the phone so you killed her. Mabel wasn't any more your aunt than I'm your granddad, was she? You paid her to act out the part – to be a cuddly old Aunt and care for us. You had to make your motorcycle story believable so you shot your false leg. Unfortunately, you underestimated the force of the bullet and it sent you off balance. You fell and hit your head on the hearth, knocking yourself out. That's why the gun was on the floor, wasn't it? You dropped it as you fell.'

Madeline returned her attention to driving. She had been wandering a little during her string of accusations. She eagerly waited for the response.

'My, my, you certainly are the budding detective, aren't you?' sparked Ron, dramatically breaking his silence. 'Think you're so bloody clever, don't you? You can think what you like. I hadn't planned it exactly this way but perhaps now's as good a time as any.'

Exactly how he managed to conjure up a gun was a complete mystery but nevertheless, he did. Coincidentally, it happened to be the very same gun that had shot Madeline's big toe earlier and the same gun that had presumably killed Mabel. In an instant, the barrel was touching Adam's neck, with Ron's finger twitching dangerously on the trigger.

There would have been little point in pointing the gun at Madeline, Ron knew this all too well. However, he was aware that she had one distinct weakness – Adam. He had soft vulnerable flesh.

Remarkably, for the last few weeks, Ron Poultney had put on a very convincing act and in the process, had cajoled all concerned. Clearly, he had now reverted to his true persona. Ron took on a whole new terrifying appearance, his eyes were no longer warm blue but icy blue. No longer had he the temperament of a faithful collie dog, now more like the rage of a pit bull terrier. His rather pathetic mannerisms had been overwritten by a new anger induced confidence. Madeline was convinced that he would fire the gun if provoked.

'That gun doesn't half get about a bit,' said Adam with false bravado.

'Her name was Sally Milton. As a matter of fact, I did have an Aunt

Mabel many years ago. It used to be her cottage before she left it to me. A real shame about Sally, she played the part to the letter, unfortunately, these things happen, she got in the way,' said Ron with a glimmer of regret.

Reality suddenly came flooding in and with the deluge came an uncomfortable dawning of the truth for Madeline and Adam. All the implications of his pretences, all the aspersions that he had cast and the travesties he had committed.

'This has all been you, not Barton, hasn't it? It was you who had Brownsword killed. Those two apes who shot Adam, they were working for you too, weren't they?' suggested Madeline, it was all guesswork, but she had a strong hunch that she could be hitting the centre spot every time.

'How old do you think I am?' bleated Ron, he continued oblivious to Madeline's insinuations. 'Go on guess, mid-fifties, late fifties? Don't bother, I'll tell you, I'm actually thirty-two. Bit of a shock, eh? The British government owe me a great deal and I intend that they pay up.'

Madeline was a little shocked at this revelation. In truth, he did look as though he was approaching retirement age and had consequently been considered as a kind of father or even granddad figure.

'How exactly are they going to pay up?' asked Madeline hesitantly.

She had an uneasy feeling that essentially, it involved her. Ron Poultney had waited five years for his dream to materialise and finally, the waiting was almost over. The Mad Bull project was a completely successful venture and the essence of it was now conveniently sharing the car with him. The government had their reasons for the creation of the Mad Bull project and Ron, it seemed, had his completely unrelated reasons. Even though Poppy Cock was the person officially designated to occupy the android, Madeline Bull, as far as Ron was concerned that was only a temporary measure. Eventually, it would be his turn, his new complete superhuman body and Ron's salvation. To be whole again, to be able to run, walk and dance without pain and a clumsy grace, he regarded as his right. This was his 'medal', his reward for services rendered and this award wasn't forged from cheap metal from China.

Madeline Bull was of course female and Ron was not, but this was a mere detail.

Ron summarised all this as succinctly as possible.

‘Madeline, I’m going to have your body.’

34. Abduction

True, Ron's story was almost as emotive as Poppy's, but certainly not a viable reason for Madeline to give up her new body. It wasn't going to happen, period. For now, she would have to humour him, but later on, when she had the opportunity, naturally he would have to die.

'Where to now, Ron? By any chance, the lab, so you can exchange places with me?'

'Exactly, but we're not going where you think. I have a bit of a surprise for you,' said Ron with a smirk.

Ron did indeed have a surprise for Madeline, actually, several. The first surprise was to do with Madeline's hearing, her voice box and a strange question from Ron.

'Are you ready for us, Alexander?'

Ron's question wasn't directed at either Madeline or Adam.

To Adam's and even more, Madeline's astonishment, moments later a voice came out of her lips, but it wasn't Madeline's, Poppy's or one of Madeline's altered voices. It was a cold, solemn voice, the voice of another of the scientists.

This time it was Mike Spencer, whose real name was apparently… Alexander!

'*Yes, everything is ready.'*

'You see Madeline, we've moved you, lock stock and barrel. One hell of a job but it has been done with complete success,' said Ron proudly.

'You can't have done, that's impossible, I would have noticed, and besides the intruder alert system, you told me about… That was all bullshit, wasn't it? I haven't got an intruder whatsit, have I?'

Madeline now realised that she'd been duped. The surveillance system giving her a view of the lab was all fabricated. What she saw was most likely an early recording on a loop. It was a smokescreen so her tank and all that went with it could be dismantled and moved. She recalled the bouts of dizziness and nausea – the symptoms of motion sickness. The horrible truth came over her in an instant. Ron was utterly insane, seriously irrational, but worst of all, he had a gun in Adam's neck.

Before Ron could tell her, she was right, it *was* bullshit, her voice box was violated again.

'My daughter… Rose, please tell me she's alright…?'

This question from a distressed sounding Mike Spencer now apparently called Alexander, brought on a sudden awkward pause. Ron was clearly stuck for something to say. After a short delay, gave him a suitable answer.

'Yes… she's… she's fine,' replied Ron, indifferently.

Just to recap so far:

Paul Brownsword, formerly known as Turner.

Professor Barton, formerly known as Chris Reynolds.

Ron Poultney, formerly known as Rob Hogarth.

Alexander, formerly known as Mike Spencer.

Suddenly it was all fitting together, not just events happening now but many things that had occurred since that day in the Black Bull when she saw the article about the death of Brownsword in the newspaper.

Madeline looked starkly at Ron. No longer was he pressing the gun into the folds of Adams' neck, there was no need. Ron was in control, in control of just about everybody and everything. He was engulfed in his bitterness.

Added to the list of recent revelations, Alexander, alias Mike Spencer, was being forced to go along with Ron's mad scheme because he had apparently abducted his daughter.

Another dawning was that Barton was, in all likely hood, completely innocent. She replayed snippets of his phone conversations using one of her inbuilt apps:

'You CAN trust me…

Maddy, there are greater things at work here…

Adam is perfectly safe where he is…

I have someone watching over your mother…

He had been wisely maintaining his distance, but at all times, doing his utmost to protect Madeline, Adam and *Poppy's* mother. Now she was heavy with remorse, chiefly because a few weeks ago, she had unjustly threatened Barton with the vulnerability of his daughter,

Lauren.

‘You sick, evil monster, you’ve got Alexander’s daughter? How long?’ Madeline raged with loathing.

‘She’s all right,’ said Ron with a glimmer of shame.

‘How long?’ she asked calmly.

Ron wouldn’t answer.

‘How Long!?’ she demanded.

‘Lauren will be okay as long no one does anything stupid.’

Whether it was a slip of the tongue or carelessly filling in the details, Ron had said Lauren, not Rose. Lauren was Barton’s daughter.

‘Lauren? That’s Barton’s daughter?’ queried Madeline.

She hoped it was a slip of the tongue but then even more reality dawned. She remembered what Barton said on the phone: “*the bastard can’t die yet”*. It all made sense now. Can’t die yet, because Ron also had his daughter held captive somewhere.

‘You’ve got both of them, haven’t you, Barton’s daughter and Alexander’s daughter? You really are a monster!’

Ron Poultney didn’t answer, his silence implied the worst.

As it is not applicable to be on first-name terms with a monster, ‘Ron’ is now dropped. ‘Poultney’ will be used until further notice.

Madeline accepted that there was no point in reasoning with someone inhuman, totally abhorrent, so she sensibly rested her tongue for a short while. Meanwhile, Adam was waiting for a chance to overpower Poultney. The gun was now wavering and distancing itself considerably from his neck, but as yet, not presenting any particular opportunity. Turning around, face to face with Poultney would probably result in a bullet in his face or head. Then Adam would be dead, Madeline would be mortified and Poultney would have one less problem.

The sun had fallen low in the sky which necessitated Adam to lower the sun visor. A mirror on the back of the visor was carefully angled so that he had a good rear view of Poultney and the gun.

‘Where are we heading?’ asked Madeline coolly.

‘I’ll tell you when to turn!’ snapped Poultney.

As to be expected, Madeline had a myriad of thoughts galloping around in her head. She thought about the poor children and what

they must be going through. She shamefully thought about poor Barton. Obviously, he was completely exonerated. She squirmed at her unjust behaviour towards Barton and her violent actions at the hospital. Barton was nobly trying to protect Adam, but she returned his kindness by unforgivably using his daughter to intimidate him. Then she went on to maim several innocent security guards and finally drag Adam out into the danger zone. There was only one person in the world that could find where Adam was located and then get him out of a top security hospital and that was Madeline Bull. Poultney knew this and cleverly used her privileges.

All it took to frame Barton was a conveniently placed phone number on the thug's mobile phone. She never stopped to think that it may have been planted. However, there was *one* good thing to come out of all this, it seemed that Madeline's mother was safe in Barton's care, after all.

Madeline knew it was all up to her now. She had been given this remarkable new body brimming with technology and it was time she used it to its full potential.

She had to find a way out of this situation and save Alexander's and Barton's daughters as quickly as possible.

Impetuousness aside, it was important that she let her thought process run its course before she took any action. The most startling revelation was that her tank containing her real body had been relocated. How the hell, had they managed to move her tank along with all the tubes, wires, hydraulics and life-supporting equipment attached, in full view of everyone? Then she realised why the thugs had bombed the building. It had purposely been made unsafe so it would be unoccupied and clear of prying eyes. No one to witness the removal of a particular stainless-steel tank and no one to ask any pertinent questions.

As to the journey to her new location, there were several matters where she needed assurance. For instance: Were they careful with her equipment? Did they drive recklessly? Did they damage anything? Did they connect everything back up properly? Have they topped up her food supply? Is everything now working as it should?

The backup power supply warning light was still showing in her vision so obviously no, to the last question.

'Ever likely I suffered from dizzy spells and nausea for several days,' she suddenly blurted out.

Finally, her thoughts moved on to the disturbing aspirations of Ron Poultney who had designs on her wonderful new body – *over her dead*

body. Madeline had already earmarked him to die and die soon if possible. If Poultney did succeed, it would surely be the end of Poppy. One thing's for sure, her real frail body would not be able to survive out of the tank.

It was now or never. She watched Adam twitching, waiting for the right moment to make a move, but that was the last thing Madeline wanted. Adam had already gone through the wars, but mercifully, he was still here to tell the story. She carefully glanced at Adam and indicated a 'no' motion, more with her eyes than with her head.

'Do you know, an office cleaner, slipping on a wet floor, gets more compensation than I got for losing part of my leg?' added Poultney, continuing on his theme of bitterness and dissatisfaction.

'Look, I can sort of understand why you feel this way but what have these children or for that matter, their parents done to deserve what you're putting them through,' said Madeline, attempting the therapist approach.

Poultney paused before he answered

'Don't worry, everything will be fine.'

They were such empty words. His mind was set and nothing was going to stop him from going ahead with his mad, evil scheme… apart from his imminent death. Adam and Madeline sensed that he wanted to say more, but that would have to do for now.

Another pause of heavy silence followed. Any attempt at reasoning was futile with psychopath Poultney.

Madeline now had to concentrate on her driving. The Gods had decided to join in and aggravate the situation by throwing buckets of rain down and saturating the road surface. No longer was the sun shining, all the blue sky had faded away, shadows had dispersed and the windscreen wipers could only do their best. As Poultney wasn't wearing his seatbelt, it would have been a perfect solution to skid off the road into a poor unsuspecting tree. There was a good chance he would be thrown forward, from the back seat into the windscreen. Adam would be alright, he had belted up. However, Poultney would certainly have time to pull the trigger before momentum took control of his destiny. Madeline would most likely be unharmed, but what good would that be without Adam to share the rest of her life with? She decided reckless driving was a bad idea.

'You've moved my body to another location, then? It must have been one hell of a challenge. All my life support stuff and tank and doing it without me suspecting anything?'

‘We considered moving you when you were asleep to save you from getting motion sickness but that wasn’t practical. Giving you Benadryl was an option too, but we didn’t have time,’ said Poultney.

‘Couldn’t be bothered, you mean!’ snapped Madeline

‘Well, conveniently, you put it down to a stomach bug, so no harm done.’

‘But how have you had the time to do all this? You’ve barely been away from the cottage over the last few weeks,’ puzzled Adam.

Poultney didn’t answer. He could easily have shot Adam in the neck to shut him up, but fortunately, he resisted. Nothing either Madeline or Adam said mattered now. Everything was on track, soon he would become Madeline Bull and that was that.

These were the facts: Every morning, at roughly the same time, Poultney went out in Mabel’s Morris Minor car. It was a habitual procedure that often went unnoticed. Both Madeline and Adam assumed he was nipping into town for perhaps a newspaper and provisions. The consequence of being in love and contented is that time often flows by unnoticed. Consequently, they were never particularly aware of how long he was missing. Anyhow, he was always back before he was missed. It was now clear that Poultney had a completely sinister reason for his daily outings.

Despite a futile attempt at curbing her impetuousness, little thought went into the consequences of Madeline’s following actions:

It was difficult to play with her mole without Poultney watching her. She covertly signalled to Adam in the rear-view mirror using no more than her eyes. One glance was at Poultney and the following glance was at her mole. Adam assumed Madeline wanted him to create a diversion. He had contributed very little up to now, mainly because he had a gun in his neck, but now was the time to make his presence felt.

‘Ron, if you’ve always wanted to inhabit the Madeline Bull android body, why didn’t you suggest it to the other scientists before Poppy was chosen? You never know, they may have considered you?’ suggested Adam bravely.

‘Consider me? Me, a mere Green Berry over a TV bimbo!’

That’s all it took, a nerve was touched and his mind wandered. The last thing Poultney heard was a hissy, farty sound. Madeline had managed to activate her useful sleeping gas feature. This was no mean feat while driving. Adam also suffered the consequences of the gas but remained conscious just long enough to hear Madeline say sorry to him, once more.

It may have been a stupid and irresponsible thing to do, but she had to do something. Alexander remotely witnessed Madeline's actions and spoke calmly through her hearing system.

'Well Madeline, full marks for trying but I don't think that was a very wise thing to do.'

'Sorry, but I couldn't just sit here and do nothing.'

'He's completely mad, you know. Four weeks he's had my daughter. God knows how she is… I'm worried sick.'

'I completely understand what you're going through, but I'm sure your daughter is alright. While we've been at the cottage, he's been going off somewhere every morning. Most likely to tend to the girls,' reassured Madeline and then she added. 'He's got Barton's daughter as well you know?'

'Yes, apparently so. Unfortunately, with Poultney, you can only fear the worst. I regret what I've done but I hope you can understand why I had to do it?'

'Yes, of course, you must be going through hell,' sympathised Madeline.

'Do you think you could pull over?'

Madeline did as Alexander requested. She was going to anyway so that she could restrain Poultney before he regained consciousness.

'Sorry about this Madeline, I have no choice.'

Madeline was slightly confused as to what Alexander implying with his premature apology, but after a short moment, all became clear – or more to the point, unclear. Without warning her connection, Poppy to Android was severed. No longer could she operate her body, see out of her eyes or hear out of her ears, her world blacked out. Sensory deprivation was suddenly forced upon her. Fortunately, after a minute or so, an old episode of *Inspector Morse* filled her field of vision. Alexander apparently wanted her to be comfortable and entertained if not actually in control.

A car parked at the side of the road with three occupants appearing to have a doze, regrettably, didn't draw a morsel of attention from any passers-by. After all, it was wet and dismal, at a time of the day when most people just wanted to get where they were going. No one stopped, even slowed down to investigate. Three motionless people, most likely asleep but possibly dead in a car were someone else's problem.

It was a toss-up who would wake first from the effects of Madeline's

fart gas. Adam was bigger framed than Poultney and had considerably more leg, therefore more blood in his body to disperse and counteract the sleeping drug. Unfortunately, Adam was in the front seat next to Madeline and Ron Poultney was in the back seat next to a partially open window. Unfortunately, Poultney woke first. He quickly assessed that Madeline was offline and no longer a threat and then immediately pointed his handgun at Adam ready for when he came around. This happened to be twenty seconds later.

'Alexander, are you there?' yelled Poultney

'Yes, yes, calm down! The android's fully disabled.' replied a shallow voice from Madeline's vocal cords.

Alexander was clearly making a pact with this devil. Obviously, he didn't want to put his daughter in any more danger than he had to. In contrast, Barton had proved to be the more reckless of the two, going as far as he dared, knowing he was walking a tightrope with his daughter's wellbeing. He just hoped he could keep his balance.

Adam was ushered into the boot of the car at gunpoint. Alas, still no passing motorists happened to be looking in the right direction and even if they were, they convinced themselves that there was a justifiable reason for what they saw. Poultney slammed the boot lid down and then squeezed into the driver's seat forcing Madeline over towards the passenger seat. This resulted in her sliding into the well area more than on the seat. A hint of a grin flashed across Ron Poultney's face as he eagerly fired up the engine. This was either because he'd never driven a Volvo before or because things just happened to be going perfectly to plan. Possibly the latter.

Alexander had witnessed Ron Poultney transform from a keen, brilliant scientist into this evil, bitter and twisted fiend with total disregard for human life. It was an appropriate time for Alexander to offer Madeline an explanation and demonstrate that he wasn't completely spineless. He interrupted her viewing and opened up a direct communication link to Poppy in her tank.

It happened to be a crucial moment in Inspector Morse's investigation. Irritatingly, the sound of the Inspector's voice faded out, and then Alexander's voice faded in.

'Hello, Poppy. I suppose I should call you Madeline, no doubt you've got used to that now.'

'Alexander! What the hell's going on? Why have you deactivated me?'

'I had to. I'm sure he'll let my Rose die if I jeopardise his crazy plan.'

'Alexander, come to your senses! Once he's controlling *my* body, who

knows what he'll do? He's certain to kill me. I can't survive for long without Madeline's body. He'll kill you too, you know too much and he'll kill Adam just to use his bullets up. He's already killed someone called Sally Milton, at the cottage…'

'He had Brownsword killed as well you know?' whimpered Alexander, highlighting another stain in Poultney's character.

Again, the feeling of remorse resurfaced for blaming Barton for that crime and many other misdeeds. The blame was now firmly on Poultney's shoulders. He had employed the two thugs that were now in pieces at the bottom of a ditch. They shackled her up, inhumanly, in that van, killed Sid the night watchman, killed Brownsword and tried to kill Adam. They had paid for their crimes by being diced up with a laser beam. As yet Poultney hadn't paid for his.

'Look, I have to be blunt about this. Weighing things up, perhaps I was a little optimistic earlier. I can't see Poultney releasing your daughter even when he gets what he wants. We can't afford to sit back. I'm sure if I torture him a little, he's bound to tell us where he's holding the girls. You've got to reactivate me! Besides, I've seen this episode of *Inspector Morse* before… The driving instructor did it,' said Madeline.

'Well, you can discount torture. He was a Green Berry in the Royal Marines you know. He's already gone through almost as much hell as you. I'm sure he'll have no particular desire for continuing his life if he can't become Madeline Bull. Poultney will just take whatever you throw at him.'

'Surely, I've got a truth drug built into my needle finger?' suggested Madeline.

'I don't think so, besides, I think you'll find truth serums aren't as effective as they make out.'

Through desperation, Madeline's tone of voice transposed up an octave.

'Mike… Alexander, you have to reactivate me, now! I may not have a plan yet but it's my way. I usually sort things out in the end. If you insist on letting Poultney have his way, I don't hold out much hope for anyone's life including your daughter's.'

The car pulled up outside *Poppy's* new location.

35. Mixed feelings

Superficially, the small farmhouse appeared rustic and quaint, innocently nestling in the folds of the surrounding green countryside. Huge red ivy leaves covered up much of the front of the stone building and rampant weeds blanketed most of the garden. All this was a cruel facade which completely belied the true purpose of the building. A smattering of outbuildings, homes for hens and pigs surrounded the house in an orderly way. Old rusty farming implements were abandoned exactly where they broke down many decades ago. Parked up and almost camouflaged amongst this scrap was an old Ford Escort car, a motorcycle and a large transit box van *with a tail lift*. The remoteness and solitude of the location provided the perfect veil for android controlling equipment and… Poppy's tank. There were no neighbours to speak of and the nearest town happened to be the same as written instructions on the thug's delivery instructions – Merthyr Tydfil.

At gunpoint, Adam unfolded himself out of the boot of the car.

'Get the android,' demanded Poultney.

Adam muttered, 'please,' under his breath as he lifted Madeline onto his shoulder. This wasn't all that easy for Adam despite her being constructed of the latest space-age materials. Madeline was considerably heavier than the human equivalent.

It did nothing to reduce her mass, but Madeline was suddenly no longer a dead weight over Adam's shoulder. There was only one explanation, Alexander must have reactivated her. For now, though, Madeline had to play dead and wait for the right moment. However, this didn't mean to say that she couldn't discretely shuffle into a more comfortable position on her fiancé's bony shoulder.

Poultney directed Adam with his payload, to one of the outbuildings adjoining the house. The building appeared to have once been a cowshed. A certain amount of plumbing remained hanging from the ceiling that once sucked the milk from the cows. Now though, there was a whole new purpose for the room and it had little to do with udders and teats. A certain amount of cleaning up and modernisation had taken place but it was, by no means, home from home. There was no neatness to the layout of the various complex pieces of electrical

equipment filling the room. A sense of urgency had dictated the route of the wires, pipes and cables. They were mostly along the floor, some hovering in mid-air and a few strung tightly from equipment to equipment, presenting a serious health and safety issue.

But there, amid all the mayhem, was a brand-new tank, slightly bigger than the one next to it, all ready to accept the body of Ron Poultney. Madeline partially opened one eye, barely enough for her sophisticated eyesight to auto-focus. She chilled to the sight of the new stainless-steel home all freshly polished and tentatively ready for its new occupier. The tank next to it, the one with Poppy inside, looked distinctly drab by comparison, now covered in numerous dents and scratches. It was a miracle that the Madeline android still functioned correctly. Four scientists had originally created a masterpiece, assembled with painstaking precision and neatness, with one specific purpose in mind, a lifetime of reliability. Now the guarantee was void and any manufacturer's goodwill had gone bad. The tamper-proof screws had been meddled with and the chaos theory seemed to rule the day.

Alexander nodded to Adam and Adam nodded back. It was unlikely that Adam was going to be properly introduced to Alexander but he knew who he was. Adam recognised the sign of a troubled man with something heavy on his mind.

Another issue of health and safety now presented itself in the form of Poultney with his menacing gun in hand. Despite being weighed down by Madeline, Adam was itching to be a hero. He could never get accustomed to bullets ripping into his flesh, but for the one who rested heavily on his shoulders, he would do absolutely anything. The gun-toting madman was well aware that Adam was waiting for an opportune moment to make a move, so that determined the gun's direction. Alexander didn't seem to be included in Poultney's gun threat. He didn't look the sort to try anything courageous.

By now, Adam was aware that Madeline was fully functioning, but this encouraging fact wasn't particularly helping his poor overworked shoulder. With Adam's constant shuffling, Madeline had nonchalantly managed to bring her arms together. Now she could discretely wiggle her all-doing mole. It was difficult but she managed to access the menu to her laser finger weapon – her *gift* from the American scientists.

The gift:

The truth of the matter was that Americans had heard all about the infamous British claims culture. They feared that after what they had

maliciously done to Madeline, the compensation, with the right legal team, could be half their national debt. The only way out was to spend several million dollars on upgrading her and call it a gift. Ironically, they spent several times more on the upgrade than the British did on the entire original project.

She tried to recall the power setting when she last used the weapon. To be cavalier with such a lethal device would be irresponsible. If Madeline had been allowed to have a say in the software for this particular weapon, she would have had it always defaulting back to stun after every use, but of course, she didn't. Then she remembered, it was full power and used on the two thugs now in pieces in a ditch somewhere. They deserved nothing less.

'Just the ticket,' she thought.

On all accounts though, it was a good shot. It sliced its way through skin and bone like a chainsaw through chocolate cake, taking Poultney's gun holding hand clean off at the wrist. Unfortunately, this time, the wound wasn't cauterised properly and an awful lot of warm red blood sprayed across the room. Poultney now had another bit of his body missing and naturally, he wasn't very happy about it.

This event caused a plethora of mixed feelings from all five occupants of the room. This was an expected consequence whenever Madeline Bull had a hand in things:

Adam was reasonably pleased with the outcome, mainly because Madeline had now removed herself from his overburdened shoulder.

Madeline accepted that she may have been a touch impulsive and possibly a little too enthusiastic in her behaviour, but on balance, she was pleased with the outcome.

Alexander didn't appear very pleased at all, possibly because he had just lost any hope of ever seeing his daughter again.

Poultney was writhing in pain and jiggling like a dying wasp, making one hell of a bloody mess on the period granite tiled floor, so he wasn't happy.

Last but certainly not least, Poppy, just like Madeline, was pleased with the outcome and gave a huge sigh of relief. Her home/tank/life support box, wasn't going to be disconnected from Madeline Bull and she wasn't going to have to watch television on her inbuilt entertainment system for the rest of her life.

Poultney was in a seriously bad way, his body now seriously incomplete. However, no one could be expected to show any sympathy for him, so they didn't. This is what happens when you are

an evil, two-faced monster.

What was not immediately apparent was that Madeline's laser beam had not only chopped off his hand but overshot slightly, slicing into half of his lower torso. With the excessive amount of blood spurting everywhere, this was something no one had noticed, not even Poultney.

Because of this rather serious injury, he had just enough time to say a couple of words:

'You Bastard!'

And then he was dead. As the reference was singularly implied, exactly who he had directed this outburst at, was unclear. No matter, no longer was he a menace to anyone. He had, however, left a desperate legacy.

'Oh my God!' shrieked Alexander. 'What the hell have you done?'

As a blessing, Madeline had managed to avoid any blood spatters. She straightened herself up and tucked herself in after the fireman's lift. Her allure was back. Adam stretched himself upwards after severe spinal torture. To recap: he had been crammed inside a car boot for an hour and then immediately afterwards, supported a very heavy girlfriend on his shoulder.

'Don't worry, we'll find the girls, they'll be OK. Contact Barton; bring him up to date and tell him to get his police friends over here, we have some searching to do,' said Madeline, attempting to calm the tense situation by playing down the scale of the problem.

'You might as well tell him yourself. Disable your sanctuary mode. I tried to do it but I couldn't control that program from here,' said Alexander.

Once again Madeline took charge. It was a trait of being an android, having matured confidence and incidentally, being incredibly gorgeous. She was convinced something would work out and that everybody would live happily ever after, but, as usual, she hadn't a morsel of a plan. Perhaps this time her confidence was a little too optimistic. This wasn't the first time she had been recklessly impetuous. However, this time her lack of forethought may well have endangered the two young girls: Alexander's daughter and Barton's daughter.

Barton had to know the worst.

'Madeline calling… come in Barton. I trust you and your police friends are listening in. Bad news I'm afraid, Poultney's dead and your

daughter is still missing. We're at Pump farm, Thorncliffe near Merthyr Tydfil.'

Within seconds, a text flashed across her vision: *'OK be with you within the hour.'*

Madeline had previously treated Barton with considerable contempt but now she had a lot of humble pie to munch her way through – if only. She could have profusely apologised there and then, but for now, even a single sorry was unforthcoming. Now was not the time.

They used the hour wisely to clean up after Poultney. It was only right that they put him back together as best as they could even though he was dead. The floor also had to be mopped, although, the grout between the period granite floor tiles was now permanently stained with copious amounts of spilt blood. These tasks weren't particularly helpful towards finding the girls but it was something to do while they waited for Barton and the police to arrive.

Madeline greeted Barton apprehensively, as he entered the room. Barton nodded at Adam and Alexander and then looked around at the haphazard wiring, the randomly placed equipment and the precarious pipework crisscrossing the room. His eyes then gazed at the new tank next to Poppy's. He said nothing, but his look of astonishment said it all. He wanted to say, 'how the hell, have we got ourselves into this mess', but couldn't bring himself to do so. Alexander sensed his despair and shrugged his shoulders in apparent sympathy.

'This is Inspector Stoddard. I expect he has one or two questions to ask all of you,' said Barton.

The Inspector and two other police officers proceeded to stoop precariously over Poultney's pale dead body.

'Well, give me a stiff one, Barkeep, he's carved up a bit!' said Stoddard casually. 'No doubt you're going to tell me it was all in self-defence?'

'Yes, it was! He had a gun on us,' protested Madeline defensively.

'What the bloody hell did you use, an axe or something?' suggested Stoddard.

It was a good time for Barton to have a discrete word in Stoddard's ear. Madeline, with her hearing turned up full, managed to hear the odd phrase like licensed to kill, British agent, Wardate slayer, occasionally impetuous and laser weapon. Whatever he said, it was enough to drop the normal line of enquiries and ask something more pertinent.

'Remember, innocent until proven guilty, is still the law of the land,

even here in South Wales,' said Stoddard.

'Well, he was guilty! Adam's still got the gun barrel mark on his neck. Besides, he was bitter and twisted, he wanted retribution, and he wanted my bod… boyfriend dead,' rambled Madeline anxiously.

Stoddard picked up the offending gun that had been carefully placed on the window ledge. He opened up the barrel.

'This is the revolver in question I presume? …That's interesting, no bullets left. You say he was threatening you with this?' Stoddard asked patronizingly.

'How was I to know the *revolver* was empty?' bleated Adam.

It figured if they'd spared the time to think about it. Four in poor Mabel's body, one in Poultney's leg and one in Madeline's toe made six in total. There was a strong possibility that the gun was empty.

There was another matter that Adam and Madeline had completely cast aside. They were now rubbing shoulders with three police officers and it wasn't all that long ago that they were both wanted in connection with the death of Sid, the night watchman. However, since then, things had moved on considerably: Two thugs, dissected in a ditch, six hospital guards painfully impaled with a chair and now Poultney, carved up like a beef joint. Hopefully, her license to kill would cover her actions, but just in case it didn't, she always had her fart gas at the ready.

All this aside, there was another pressing issue that required attention. Whilst the police officers were otherwise preoccupied with the disturbing sight of Poultney's reassembled body, she discretely sidled up to Barton and Alexander.

'Sorry, I know it's bad timing chaps but could one of you sort out my food and drink supplies? Both dried up several hours ago.' requested Madeline quietly.

She hadn't thought it appropriate to mention this comparatively trivial fact, but now she was starving and thirsty again. The humble pie wasn't at all filling and she hated toothpaste. It turned out to be a simple fault to fix. In fact, it wasn't a fault at all. The food and drink tubes had simply been moved over to the new tank leaving nothing at all connected to Poppy's tank.

That was her fate, no food or drink. Watching television for the rest of her life may not have been as long an experience as she had previously thought.

36. Fairy godmother

Without any further delay, Inspector Stoddard and his men began the mammoth task of searching for the children. They had a massive area to comb and time was of the essence. Adam told Inspector Stoddard as much as he could, but it wasn't a lot to go on. All he could say for certain was that Poultney left the cottage each morning at around ten and came back sometime later, but he wasn't sure exactly when. He went in Mabel's green Morris Minor and nearly always came back with a newspaper and perhaps a few groceries.

There was nothing Barton and Alexander could do but sweat it out and wait for the police to do their job. Now that the police were out of the way, certain relevant questions were overdue. Madeline had never been completely convinced with Poultney's reasons for taking over her wonderful new body.

'There's something that doesn't quite ring true about all this. Remarkable as *I* may be, operating this amazing mechanical body you've created, it can only ever be a poor substitute for reality. I have no choice in the matter because of the condition of my real body but only having half a leg is no reason to lock yourself away in a machine for eternity. Am I missing something here?' probed Madeline.

There was a considerable pause before Barton decided to speak.

‘I suppose you have a right to know… It all started about three months ago, soon after you returned from America.’

Barton went on to explain the extraordinary chain of events that caused the mess they were now in.

‘Brownsword was approached by someone claiming to represent the American government. He was a cocky chap who was convinced that money could buy just about anything. To be fair, with the amount on offer, he was probably right. On the table was treble the entire Mad Bull project budget plus five million dollars for each of us four Scientists.

He wanted a Mad Bull android. Not ours but another one with exactly the same high spirits, same whit, same confidence and the same sentient algorithms that ours had. Of course, Brownsword had to turn him down, there wasn’t a choice in the matter. He couldn’t possibly reveal the carefully guarded secret that you, Poppy, control Madeline Bull and that Madeline Bull wasn’t in any way autonomous like they assumed it was. The truth was never an option. It would have exposed Madeline Bull for who you, really are and undermined the effectiveness of our government’s investment.’

‘So, that’s what I am, a government investment! That’s nice to know,’ interrupted Madeline.

Barton continued, ‘I must confess, five million dollars would have come in very handy. No doubt it would for the other scientists too, especially one in particular.’

‘Poultney?’ interrupted Adam.

‘Yes, he, more than anyone else, was furious that Brownsword had turned down the American’s offer. True, none of us were consulted, but that was beside the point, it was an impossible ask. From what we can gather, Poultney contacted this American agent and told him that he would find a way to deliver a new Madeline Bull autonomous android to them for twenty-five million dollars.’

‘Apparently, he found a way, a ruthless and devious one,’ added Adam.

Barton continued, ‘Certainly was! His first step, it appears, was to remove Brownsword from the equation by having him killed. Naturally we, the other scientists, wouldn’t agree to help him build another Madeline Bull automaton and he certainly couldn’t do it alone. Consequently, his next step was to become a child abductor.’ Barton paused for a brief moment to compose himself. ‘I knew the possible implications, but I had to be resolute, I was not going to co-

operate. Perhaps it was a mistake to inform the police, but I did and that's that. I couldn't tell them everything, obviously.' Barton paused again.

While talking, he noticed one of the many tubes to Poppy's tank, had a kink in it. He casually straightened it out.

'God, that's better! Fresh air!' cheered Madeline.

'It was your air feed… Anyway, to cut a long story short, it's been a terrible few months,' Barton paused with overwhelming emotion. It was clear he was deeply distressed.

'Think positive, Stoddard and his men will leave no stone unturned,' Adam assured him.

Barton continued, 'A psychopath controlling an android with your capabilities doesn't bear thinking about. As I've said, without me, Poultney hadn't the know-how or the facilities to build another Mad Bull automaton, therefore, there was only one avenue open to him, he needed to capture you. Then all he had to do was construct a new tank for himself and transfer the interface over from your tank to his.'

'And he captured me whether I realised it or not,' said Madeline.

'He gained your trust.'

'I admit it, he did. I was completely taken in, even to the point of framing you. The only contact stored in the thug's mobile phone was yours, what was I to think? Poultney was fiendishly cunning,' said Madeline.

'Fiendish bastard, you mean. If he'd pulled it off, your Madeline body would have been controlled by Poultney instead of you. All he had to do was perhaps trim your hair and alter a few facial features and the Americans would think they had a brand-new automaton,' said Barton.

'Yes, but not the same personality. I *am* Madeline Bull and I make Madeline Bull unique. If this body had Poultney's crazy traits – pent-up anger, irrational behaviour, self-loathing, they probably would have demanded their money back,' said Madeline.

'Your right, Poultney was many things, but feisty was not one of them,' Barton smiled.

Who was it then, who activated the ultrasonic device when I was shackled up in the van?' asked Madeline.

'I think you'll find, that was Angela,' said Barton.

'Angela?'

‘Sorry, Justine Constable, as you knew her. I asked her to keep an eye on you on the internet link, but unfortunately, once you were in sanctuary mode, you were on your own.’

‘So, for a time, I did have a fairy godmother, after all, called Angela… A fitting name,’ said Madeline. ‘Where is Angela now?’

‘I don’t know. I’m a bit concerned. I haven’t heard from her for over three weeks,’ said Barton.

Madeline knew from Barton’s tone that this didn’t sound very promising. She decided it was a good time to change the subject and ask a question that had been gnawing at her for several minutes.

‘By any chance, was the name of this cocky American chap, Roger Bennett?’

Naturally, it was. This irritated her considerably. He must have caught sight of the yellow android blood when she removed his bowtie and that was all the proof he needed. Following on from his experience of that memorable evening, having their own Madeline Bull android was paramount. If only she had acted a little less human and left out the confidence, assertiveness and high spirits. Then Roger Bennett would have reported back, ‘Forget it chaps, we can do better ourselves.’

And then another penny dropped…

She couldn’t explain why it had taken so long for this particular thought to surface but right from that first encounter with Roger Bennett in the park in New York, he looked strangely familiar. Of course, he did! He was on the plane to Belarus sitting opposite her when she was on her way to kill De Par. He was the one with the transmitter which caused the interference. Even then, his attempts to follow her had dismally failed.

He really was a cocky twerp!

37. The search

Although Madeline was spiritually drawn to be re-acquainted with her true self from time to time, too much contact began to depress her. It was the artificial reality and the *actual* reality that seriously conflicted with each other. The artificial reality was obviously what Madeline preferred by far. Being comfortable in your own skin did not apply in this case. The actual reality was too grim for her to bear for too long. She had spent far too much time alongside herself in the cowshed. Now she was keen to get away from the technology that made her exist, feel the fresh air on her skin sensors and see the outside world on her mini OLED television screens.

Evidently, Poultney turned out to be a scheming demon. Every move he made was calculated and precise. All his tracks were meticulously covered up; not a single clue could be found. The distance between Mabel's cottage and the farmhouse was twelve miles which would take about half an hour in the old Morris. His daily trips to the farmhouse and back at some point included collecting provisions from town and hopefully tending to the children. These were presumed to be the facts.

Madeline scoured her brain cells for any possible anomalies in Poultney's behaviour at the cottage. After a while, she came up with quite a trivial one, but perhaps an important one – sometimes he bought a lottery ticket. He had the foresight to destroy all the shop receipts but surely, he would have kept a lottery ticket, his numbers may have come up! If just one could be found, it would identify the shop he bought it from and the precise time, just as a till receipt would have done.

A subsequent search of the cottage was carried out, but alas, not a single lottery ticket was found. He had been very careful. Fortunately, the police didn't give up that easily. Their experience told them that if a ticket was anywhere it would be in the very last place they would look. This very last place would be a place, with hindsight, where they should have looked in the first place. Stuck to the bottom of the inside of a blue wheelie bin, with something sticky and smelly, was a stained but readable lottery ticket. It was all they needed.

The police now had a town and a time. They found the shop where he bought the lottery ticket and most likely, his newspaper. The shop proprietor, as to be expected, didn't recognise any of Poultney's mug shots and inconveniently had no CCTV installed.

Driving his car at an average speed of 30 mph, Poultney should have taken approximately ten minutes to do the five-mile journey to the shop. According to the time on the lottery ticket, assuming he left the cottage at ten, it took him over forty minutes to reach the shop. This presented a discrepancy of around thirty minutes – sufficient time for him time to check on the children. Realistically, this was only one lottery ticket providing a single reference point in time. There was no accounting for roadworks, finding a parking space, queuing in the shop, and so on, but it was all they had to go on. Nevertheless, it did suggest that somewhere on the five-mile stretch of road from the cottage to the shop was most likely where the girls would be found.

Following statutory procedures, several circles were drawn on several maps and hours of CCTV camera footage were unnecessarily examined. The distinct little green Morris Minor car was eventually spotted on camera footage taken at a Tesco supermarket car park in an entirely different town. This significant but unimportant discovery resulted in long deliberations, long debates, much swearing and pointless arguments. A couple of Police Officers came up with a wild theory that Poultney had another car, a decoy car. They suggested that it was parked somewhere in the town and specifically used to travel to where the girls were held captive. No video evidence from the town's cameras supported this theory, no second car could be found and his journey times didn't allow for such a diversion. Naturally, though, this theory had to be investigated. All avenues of enquiries had to be checked out, proved or discounted, no matter how ridiculous. Subsequently, this created a mountain of paperwork and wasted a ridiculous amount of time, time which they really didn't have. The two police officers who suggested the decoy car theory were promptly suspended without pay and told to keep their opinions to themselves in future.

And so, it was back to the B4562, the section of road from Mabel's cottage to the shop where the search was to be concentrated.

Alexander stayed behind to service Madeline's equipment and finish off the moving process. It helped as a distraction from his desperation. Madeline became her positive self again now distanced from her tank and all the trauma it entailed.

After two days of frantic police work, despite all the benefits of forensics and modern-day crime detection techniques, the search came

to a grinding halt. They concluded that the information from the lottery ticket had produced a false lead and decided to return to the 'decoy car' theory. Subsequently, they had to reinstate the two officers and promote them.

The concerns for the girls had, by now, become very grave indeed. Alexander remained in a state of desperation, whimpering each time Madeline spoke to him through her internal systems, but Barton remained strong and focused.

Madeline held on to her high spirits despite the hopelessness of the situation. Deep down, she disliked herself for this lack of feeling but it was a consequence of her plight. She had developed a tough outer shell that had to be bombarded before she would display an appropriate emotion. One benefit from being like this was that she could focus on the problem in-hand and say things like,

'Look on the bright side, it's a lovely day.'

Now that it was no longer fitting to stay at Aunt Mabel's cottage, Adam and Madeline opted to stay at *The Grape Vine*, a small hotel in the centre of town. It was family-run, warm and welcoming, so they took the honeymoon suite for no particular reason.

While the police carried out several pointless searches, Adam and Madeline conducted their own investigations. This amounted to driving up and down the road looking for places where the girls may be held. Just as they were about to call it a day and return to the hotel, Madeline had something very predictable to say,

'Adam, there's something we've overlooked, there has to be.'

It was a glib comment but it was a trigger for amassing what she knew: The B4562 was a lonely winding road, much of it through dense forests and much of it darkened by dense overhanging trees. There were only three houses en route and all had been checked thoroughly. There were no barns, huts, sheds, outbuildings or anything remotely suitable as a shelter for the girls. However, taking everything into account and the time Poultney had available, they had to be near this particular road. Poultney must have stumbled upon a completely concealed and torturously lonely hideaway that was literally, under everyone's noses.

Much of the road cut through the hillsides, higher ground on one side, lower ground on the other. It was raining quite heavily but the road was well-drained and free from excessive water.

'Adam, all this rain that's falling on the hillside above us, how is it getting to the other side of the road?'

‘Culverts under the road,’ replied Adam.

‘How big are these culverts?’

‘Depends, from drainpipe size to a few feet in diameter!’

‘Big enough for two children?’

‘Oh yes, plenty big enough! Brilliant thinking! OK, how do we go about finding them? Unfortunately, we can’t see them from the car?’ pondered Adam.

‘We’ll have to walk the route, all five miles of it. I bet that’s something the police haven’t bothered to do!’ she surmised.

Madeline communicated back to Barton about her theory. It was accepted enthusiastically. As expected, the police had come to a dead-end in their new search so any fresh ideas were welcomed. Madeline and Adam opted not to wait for the Police to arrive, they were far too eager to make a start. They decided to begin at the cottage and walk towards the town. The girls could be anywhere along the route, but the cottage end was considered a logical place to start. All they had to do was to look for narrow tyre tracks or footprints and then explore beneath that part of the road. The Morris Minor happened to be shod with the original, distinctively slim tyres. These would have left unusually narrow tracks in the mud at the side of the road. Unfortunately, it was raining as it frequently did in this part of the country and rain has a nasty habit of washing away evidence. However, the weather had been unusually dry before today, therefore, any tyre imprints would hopefully be baked in and would take a while to disperse.

Puzzlingly, in just half a mile of the road from the cottage, they found several instances of identical narrow tyre tracks in the mud at the side of the road. Unfortunately, no culverts existed at these locations. This search was going to take a while.

The Police eventually arrived in three cars with sirens blazing. The first car carried Inspector Stoddard. The incessant rain had certainly done its job and drenched Adam and Madeline to the bone and titanium, respectively.

‘How a’we doin’,’ taunted Stoddard inappropriately.

‘Fine, fine, just fine,’ said Madeline nonchalantly.

‘Don’t suppose you’ve found anything,’ said Stoddard snootily then continued. ‘No worries, we’ll take over from here. That’s what we get paid for. Thanks for your help, go and dry yourselves out before you catch a chill.’

‘Surely, the more who are searching, the better. We aren’t exactly flushed with time you know,’ said Adam

‘Please, leave it to us, we’ll find ‘em before sundown,’ Stoddard assured them.

With that, Madeline and Adam walked the half-mile back to the cottage to fetch the car and left Stoddard and his posse to continue the search. Frustration overflowed and so did their Wellingtons.

‘Who does he think he is, Hopalong Cassidy? How a’we doin – we’ll find ‘em before sundown. Bloody idiots,’ grumbled Adam.

‘Rise above it. All that matters is that they find the girls before it’s too late. Besides, we are wet and I don’t want *you* catching a chill,’ said Madeline putting Adam in his place, but still showing concern.

Ten minutes later, they were climbing into the dry, warm Volvo, parked up at the cottage. Madeline became unusually quiet for once. She let Adam drive back into town. The rain pelted the windscreen with the force of a Hadron Collider, it was, after all, a typical spring day and snow was expected to arrive at any moment. Adam turned up the heater. Strangely enough, this was something even Madeline appreciated despite her climate-controlled environment in her tank. Thoughts went out to the children who were surely suffering from hyperthermia and hunger. Their experiences, if they were fortunate to survive this ordeal, would surely haunt them for the rest of their lives. Madeline was a super being. She had discovered that she could defeat the evilest of mankind. She could withstand bullets, fire and angle grinders but she couldn’t save these poor children and this frustrated and annoyed her. She recalled *Superman* feeling similar to this in the movie. His solution was to fly that fast around the Earth that time went backwards. Of course, she couldn’t do that, but she could do other equally useful things.

She suddenly remembered she had privileged access to all know the databases.

‘Maps’ had an entry on the list of available databases. From the directory menu list, she selected *‘local maps’* and then entered a postcode. Then she had a choice: *Aerial, Ordinance, Wayleave or Construction.* She selected *‘Construction’*. Then she zoomed into the section of the B4562 from the cottage to the town – so far so good. It has to be mentioned here that cartography, geography topography and any other ‘graphies were never Poppy’s favourite subjects. In fact, simply getting a map the right way up was normally a challenge in itself. It wasn’t her fault, of course, satellite navigation was mostly to blame and before that, the route planning services provided by the

vehicle breakdown people.

But there it was! Madeline was considerably surprised by her success. A highly detailed schematic drawing of the B4562 appeared in her field of vision. Four culverts were indicated including specific depth beneath the road and the diameter of the pipes. Madeline had been silent for quite a while. Mole wiggling took a lot of concentration, so when she did eventually scream out with excitement, Adam almost crashed the car into a forest.

'I've got it!' Madeline cried out.

Adam screeched the car to a halt regardless of any poor motorist, motorcyclist or jogger following. Fortunately, there wasn't.

'Assuming you're not on about some sort of illness, using your built-in facilities, you've found a map of this road, with all the culverts marked on it?' suggested Adam.

'How did you guess?'

'It's a wonder that mole of yours doesn't get sore!'

There were only two culverts on the B4562 large enough in diameter to get inside and one of them was only yards away from where they were. Madeline opened up her communications with Barton again and told him to send the police to the location of the other culvert, which happened to be four miles back toward Mabel's cottage.

They got out of the untidily parked car. Almost immediately Adam noticed something very significant.

'Look, footprints and notice here, as though something heavy has been dragged,' said Adam excitedly.

Moments later, both of them had successfully scaled a small stone wall beside the road and were scrambling, slipping and sliding down an embankment of nettles and ferns. At the bottom of the slope, they found themselves at the entrance of a one-metre diameter concrete pipe passing under the road. Debris had gathered at the opening, including dead tree branches and the customary large rusty corrugated steel sheet. With an abundance of nervous energy, Adam quickly tossed the items to one side, progressively revealing the inside of the cold dark concrete pipe. With the available light, they could just about make out some kind of object attached to the inside wall. Adam hastily selected the torch facility on his mobile phone. Madeline's incredible body wasn't equipped with anything as mundane as a torch but it was equipped with zero-lux vision enabling her to virtually see in the dark. The light from the mobile phone illuminated the object in all its gory detail. The object was the remains of a person, a middle-

aged female person. She was dressed in tattered grey rags, once clothes, hanging from her grey bones. The body was in a crouched position, securely cufflinked up to a hook in the wall of the culvert, but she was an adult, not a child. It was a truly horrendous, stomach-churning sight. The body was so extensively eaten away by vermin that it was barely recognisable as human. She had been dead for some time. The remains of her short blonde hair gave Madeline a strong indication of who it was. She dearly hoped she was wrong, but the big round spectacles hanging on a cord around her neck, confirmed it.

'God, the stink! Any ideas who it was… is?' asked Adam coldly.

'My fairy godmother,' said Madeline softly and respectfully. She now hoped that Barton was listening in for a change. 'Barton, can you hear me? Tell Stoddard we've found a body, four miles south from the other culvert. Sadly, it's a bit late for an ambulance. Barton, I think it's…'

'You're fairy godmother… Angela. Yes, I heard.' Barton's voice came loud and clear through Madeline's hearing system.

'She was a lovely genuine person and a good friend, not to mention a true genius. God knows what she went through,' said Madeline.

The rain had been persisting down now for a couple of hours and the culvert was beginning to do its job. What was a trickle through the pipe, was now developing into a torrent. This was not good. Not good for humans, not good for androids and not good even for corpses.

'Barton, tell Stoddard to get a move on, this culvert is filling up with water so the other one must be too,' said Madeline.

'Will do, I'm on my way there now. Phone my mobile if you want me.'

Madeline engaged explosive motion and effortlessly separated the handcuff from the steel loop in the wall of the concrete pipe. The half-decomposed body slumped untidily forward. Adam insisted on doing a fireman's lift even though he knew it would be a highly unpleasant task. Unperturbed by the stench of her rotting flesh or the bare bones pressing into his shoulders, he carried her out of the culvert, up the slippery embankment and over the stone wall. It took a while, but he wasn't going to give up. Madeline helped him place her on the bankside amid the nettles and bracken, however, she would no longer suffer from the thorns and stings or the cold and damp. Unfortunately, no one had heard her cries of help or screams of terror. To die here, all alone in the dark, was by far the worst way for anyone to die. What on earth could have justified this kind of torture and horrific death? But then, Madeline remembered it was Angela who activated her ultrasonic finger when she was tied up in the van. Poultney must

have found out and this was his way of punishing her.

Madeline noticed deep grazes in her arms and legs as though she'd been forcibly dragged into the culvert but there was something odd, something very odd indeed. For now, she kept this anomaly to herself.

Four miles up the road in the other culvert, a ten-year-old girl called Lauren was found, fastened with several plastic ties to a similar metal hoop in the concrete wall of a similar pipe. She was suffering from hypothermia, severely malnourished and dehydrated, but she was alive. The experience she had endured for the past few weeks was truly dreadful for a ten-year-old, all alone, in such a hostile environment. This experience would no doubt provide her with a lifetime of nightmares. A broad piece of Tape was stuck across her mouth to stop her from crying out. It had been stuck on for so long that when removed it tore away fragments of skin from her dry lips. However, no longer did she scream or cry out, her screams and cries were all used up.

Fortunately, Barton managed to arrive at the scene before the ambulance. Tears poured from the hard man's eyes and cascaded down his whiskery cheeks. A gentle warm hug from her father did her more good than an army of child therapists could ever do. She couldn't talk, she couldn't stop shivering, but a smile cracked across her filthy, flea-bitten face. You couldn't possibly measure the relief or describe the overwhelming joy. For Barton and everyone involved in her successful rescue, it was a wonderful day. Barton rang his wife – they shared the tears.

It wasn't long before the ambulance arrived and Lauren had to reluctantly leave the arms of her father. There was something Barton had to do before he could rejoin her at the hospital. He had to see Angela.

Madeline and Adam waited in the car, sheltering from the rain. What remained of Angela, (Justine Constable) now lay peacefully at the side of the road. For what it was worth, they had wrapped a picnic blanket neatly around what was left of her, to keep her respectable. They sat still and silent waiting for any news of the children to reverberate through Madeline's internal hearing. Meanwhile, the patter of rain on the car roof was the only sound to be heard. Rarely a vehicle passed by, but the occupants that did would never be persuaded to stop on such a lonely stretch of road. The trees that had been Angela's only company, swayed freely in the wind just as they always did in weather like this, oblivious to the horror that had taken place near to their roots.

A police car came into view, headlights blazing, not that it was night-time or even dusk, that's what sort of day it was. The car pulled up, Barton and Stoddard got out. They both hurried over to the covered corpse. Madeline stopped Adam from getting out of the car.

'Let's not intrude,' she said quietly.

Barton gently folded back the cover, he instantly recognised her despite the decayed and partially consumed state of her face and body. He lifted her bony arm and observed the deep handcuff marks around her wrist. He examined the grazes on her arms and legs. This was a bittersweet day for him.

Stoddard remained to attend to the body, Barton climbed in the back seat of Adam *and Madeline's* car.

'Please tell me some good news,' pleaded Madeline, breaking the silence.

'Yes, Lauren was there, she's going to be okay, thank God. Pure genius, you thinking about the culverts,' said Barton.

'And Alexander's daughter, is she alright?' asked Madeline.

Barton hesitated for a moment. At first, he was puzzled by Madeline's question and then for some reason he became distinctly worried. He lowered his voice,

'Alexander hasn't got a daughter or a son for that matter…'

38. The confession

Madeline and Adam were dumbstruck. Both knew it was pointless to say pardon, or run that by me again, they knew they had heard him correctly. Independently they tried to recall the conversations they remembered having with Alexander. He blatantly lied in front of Poultney, but for some reason, Poultney went along with Alexander's bewildering pretence. It had appeared that Alexander and Barton were sharing the same torment and anguish but of course, they weren't, it was a planned deception, a sick, insensitive sham. It didn't take long for Madeline to calculate the magnitude of this heart-stopping revelation and it didn't take long for Alexander to make a response…

'Oh Shit,' shrieked Madeline, 'my arms are moving on their own!'

'Quick! Adam, grab her hands, keep her fingers pointing away from us!' yelled Barton.

Adam hadn't realised until now how strong his girlfriend was. Adam's moderate strength barely hindered her motion. Her delicate, small soft hands had the strength of a JCB digger and her fingers were twisting around for the kill.

'I dearly hope that the Americans haven't removed the circuit breaker,' said Barton as he poked, viciously around the back of Madeline's neck.

'Somewhere there's a fail-safe button that disconnects her muscle circuitry… Ah, got it!'

'Barton, I'll kill you… No, no!!'

Alexander's distorted words screeched through Madeline's voice box. Instantly Madeline's whole body went limp but leaving her speech and sight intact. In hindsight, the provision of a cut-off switch was a very sensible addition, especially for occasions such as this.

'So, what's all this about a daughter then, Alexander?' quizzed Barton.

It took a few moments for him to swallow defeat. Madeline's voice box eventually responded with Alexander's voice,

'Oh well, it looks like I'll have to revise my plans.'

'What the hell's going on? Don't tell me I've got it all wrong again?

Some judge of character I've turned out to be!' Madeline despaired.

'Sadly, Madeline, through no fault of your own, you *do* seem to bring out the worst in people. When we finished building you and brought you to life, it was the most amazing, most wonderful thing any of us had ever experienced. We felt like Gods. We had created a miracle – a priceless creation,' explained Barton.

'Being a miracle and priceless, clearly has its downsides,' added Madeline, still being allowed to talk.

Barton continued, 'For someone disabled and washed out like Poultney, being you was his ultimate desire.'

'That and the money on offer from the Americans,' interrupted Adam.

'…I've known Ron Poultney since his school days. Such a tragedy. The army completely broke him.

'Well, that kind of explains Poultney's fetishes, what about yours, Alexander?' asked Madeline.

'You haven't a clue, have you, not a clue and you're all supposed to be so damn clever,' said Alexander, his voice screeching through Madeline's vocal cords.

'Well, for a start, it seems that you betrayed Poultney. He was referring to you when he said "you bastard", wasn't he? You reactivated Madeline. You knew when she got a chance she would retaliate,' said Adam.

'Yes, I suppose I deserve the credit for that,' said Alexander, revealing his deceitfulness.

'Oh, what a tangled web I've woven,' said Madeline profoundly, over the top of Alexander's voice.

'Did *you* know about Angela in the culvert?' asked Barton

'Yes, Poultney was an animal, he just let her die there. If I'd known where she was, I would have let the police know. He was inhumane,' said Alexander through Madeline's mouth.*'*

Now was a good time to analyse the inconsistencies that Madeline had gathered together and filed under 'that's odd': The first regarded the deep grazes on Angela's arms and legs, the second, a motorcycle she noticed at the farmhouse and the third, *a lack* of narrow tyre tracks where Angela and Lauren had been found. She tried her best to think of some other conclusion that fitted the facts but there was only one. Yes, she was considered by many as a super being, but as far as being a judge of character, she was proving to be a complete failure. First of

all, she had Barton all wrong. As it turned out, he was completely innocent, just a victim of circumstance. Now, if her conclusions were right, she had Poultney all wrong too and may have to start referring to him as 'Ron' again. Poultney, most likely, had not killed or harmed anyone. True some issues had made him bitter and twisted, but mostly she suspected that he was covering up for Alexander.

It was time for Madeline to test all this out:

'Alexander, you killed Angela, didn't you?' Madeline lifelessly spoke through her voice box. 'Punishment for activating my ultrasonic device enabling me to escape from those thugs. The thing is though, you killed her long before you put her in that culvert, didn't you? All those grazes on her arms and legs from dragging her into the culvert but not a sign of blood on her clothes, strange that. Of course, if she was already dead, she wouldn't bleed, would she?'

She waited for a response, but none came so she continued.

'Oh yes, and that motorcycle at the farmhouse, it's yours, isn't it? Poultney was telling the truth. You were the motorcyclist who entered the cottage and killed Mabel and then rang Barton to reveal the location of the cottage. You were trying to incriminate Poultney. How am I doing so far?'

'You can't prove a thing,' Alexander sneered.

'We had Poultney all wrong, he was desperately trying to find Lauren and Angela, searching that particular road, a new section every day. That's why there were so many Morris Minor tyre tracks along that road, but none where we found Lauren and Angela. Unfortunately, he hadn't got around to searching those two places. He felt completely responsible because he picked Lauren up from school to help Barton out… and then you took her. With Mabel dead, you knew Poultney would abandon his search and leave the cottage after that. He must have suspected that the motorcyclist was you… Now then, why would Poultney go to all that trouble, cover for you, lie for you, even take the blame for you? As I see it, there's only one possible explanation. It was something I noticed when he was looking me up and down in the car. Most men drool when they do that, but he didn't even blush, he was just admiring his work. Poultney was gay and in love with you, am I right?

As situations go, inside a Volvo on a miserably wet afternoon, was a highly unusual place to extract a confession. The deafening patter of rain on the car roof and the wet uncomfortable clothes of the occupants did little to encourage deep reflective thought. Nevertheless, the events were unfolding and clues were fitting

together. Bizarrely, in true Mad Bull weirdness, much of the conversation was coming out of the same vocal cords, albeit two distinct voices. Madeline prided herself on her performance as a budding sleuth and now it was time to trick him into a confession. Before she continued with her interrogation Barton had the foresight to activate the voice recorder on his mobile phone.

Barton silently motioned toward Adam; he knew exactly what he had to do. The police needed to be informed about Alexander, whether the confession came or not. Madeline's accusations were certainly hitting the spot and inevitably Alexander would do a runner. Adam stealthily slithered out of the car.

The truth of the matter was that Madeline didn't know where to go next with her interrogation. She needed to think, but as it happened, she didn't have to because Barton asked a question,

'Was it all about the money, Aaron?'

Madeline broke out of her train of thought with a jerk, who the hell was Aaron? And then she realised, obviously, it was Alexander's first name. It was easy to assume Alexander was his first name but it wasn't, it was his surname. Her second thought revolved around the name in its entirety – Aaron Alexander. It was an unusual name, a name that would be remembered on a large list even if only glanced at for a second. If the list was in alphabetical order, it would be at the very top of the list…**Then she remembered**.

There were no visible signs, but Madeline was suddenly petrified. She trembled within her tank enough to cause waves in the saline fluid. She feared for her life but she was committed, she knew how to get his confession.

'Why did you kill Brownsword, did he find something out about you?' asked Madeline nervously.

'Were you to be my next target?'

Aaron Alexander was on the list – The Residents of Wardate.

'Finally, took you long enough! Can't deny it, it was all pretty much me. Well done, Madeline. Anyway, must press on, no doubt the police will be here any minute. Things haven't quite gone to plan but never mind, on to plan B. Can't have you killing off any more of my associates, can I?

Now then, I wonder if you can guess your fate? Here's a clue, I'm finishing off the job that one of my associates started. Soon you'll know what a

poached egg feels like, ha, ha, ha!'

The sound of Alexander's evil laughter faded out and Madeline's voice faded in.

'Barton! Barton! Quickly, turn me on!' demanded Madeline.

Adam climbed back in the car just at the moment that Barton was fondling Madeline's neck. In any other situation, this kind of conduct may have justified pistols at twenty paces or at least a bloody nose, but this intimacy brought Madeline's mobility back. Madeline activated in a frenzied state.

For the very first time in Madeline Bull's short life, she was trembling and utterly terrified. She only had one phobia. It was something she refused to talk about. It was a phobia she never used to have. Once she was burnt alive by a Resident of Wardate and it was going to happen again.

Who would have thought that dutiful, good-looking Mike Spencer, the one who carried Madeline Bull (3) out of Tesco on his shoulders, was thoroughly evil and on the Wardate list? It just goes to show that you can never tell who is evil at face value.

The Mad Bull android complete with an empty tank was to be Alexander's wonderful gift to the brotherhood of **Wardate**. Everyone connected with the project had to die apart from himself. Brownsword had to die first because he knew Alexander's name was on the Residents of Wardate list.

Unfortunately, things didn't quite go according to plan. If Wardate couldn't have Madeline Bull, no one could, that included Poppy.

39. Philips screwdriver

‘We have to go! Now! Quickly! Please!’ begged Madeline. For once her words were filled with helplessness and dread.

She was aware of her limitations and accepted that there was nothing in her power that she could do to save herself. For a change, she knew that her android body would be completely unharmed, but her real Poppy body was in imminent danger.

No use now, her indispensable fart gas or her Kevlar protected body. Even her laser finger couldn’t cut through this problem. Her Mad Bull body had given her invulnerability that she had come to depend on. She hid behind it, it gave her confidence, but she was always weak, always vulnerable. It was just a matter of knowing where to prod and poke.

Adam tried to drive the Volvo like the wind but because of the convoys of tractors, horseboxes, temporary traffic lights and rush hour traffic, he couldn’t. He didn’t have the benefits of a blue flashing light or a siren so he just bit his lip to pieces with frustration. Barton intended to go back with Stoddard and see his daughter in hospital, but now he had a renewed responsibility. Through Madeline’s determination, Lauren was now safe and in good hands. The least he could do was stand by his creation. He temporarily broke away from thoughts of his daughter to briefly ponder over Poultney and Alexander. From the start, he had serious reservations about Poultney, knowing all too well about his pent-up bitterness. However, because of his brilliance in computers and electronics, he was the natural choice for the project. Aaron Alexander, on the other hand, was the youngster of the team. He was a brilliant bio-mechanic, studied at Cambridge and came with the highest credentials. He was completely dependable and trustworthy – that’s what they said.

‘Well, that explains who turned off the intravenous valve,’ he concluded.

It took precisely forty minutes to get to the new home of Madeline’s real body, the cowshed next to the farmhouse. Unfortunately, it took only thirty minutes for the fire to melt the connections – the wires from Poppy’s tank to the transmitter equipment. Poppy was now back to just being Poppy, completely on her own and completely isolated.

Previously up to this moment, after only twenty minutes, Madeline was feeling uncomfortably warm. Her tank was literally becoming a hot tub. Even before that, after only fifteen minutes, she anticipated the worse and had provisionally said farewell to Adam, her sweetheart, her soul mate and her lover.

All bad for Poppy, but there was some good news worth mentioning, the fire brigade had responded quickly and put the fire out. This was somewhat academic as all the electronic equipment that controlled the Madeline Bull android and linked it to Poppy in the tank, had been totally destroyed. All the life support devices keeping Poppy alive in the tank had also perished. The cowshed, that contained all this melted equipment, was now a burnt-out ruin, smouldering and steaming from the wet timbres. Fire and water did not make a harmonious environment for electronic android controlling equipment.

Adam shouted through the small air vents at the top of Poppy's little stainless-steel home, her tank, but there was no response. As far as Adam was concerned, there was only one course of action: If Poppy was still alive, she had to be removed from the tank quickly. He decided that it was his job and his duty to do this. A Phillips screwdriver was all that was required. Adam's hand trembled increasingly as he worked his way around the twelve pan head screws holding down the lid of the tank. The screws were warm but not hot. Perhaps Poppy had not been poached as Alexander had predicted. Perhaps her experience was no worse than a sauna inside a steel pressure cooker. Finally, he reached the last screw, as per usual, it was the tightest and most stubborn, taking as long to undo as all the others put together.

This was because it was cross-threaded when it went in, but Adam wouldn't have known that.

40. Misconceptions

‘Nurse! Nurse! She’s waking up… quick!’ yelled Adam across the ward.

Her eyes were still tightly shut but her head stirred gently from side to side. Her breathing suddenly became stronger and pronounced as if she had previously been breathing through a straw. She licked her dry lips and attempted to utter a language of sorts from deep within her throat. And then one top eyelid broke contact with the associated bottom eyelid revealing a cornea, the blue of which, burst through her lashes like the blue sky through a gap in the clouds. It was then the turn of the other eye to do exactly the same.

Adam wanted to be the first person Poppy would see when she came out of her coma. Poppy wanted Adam to be the first person she would see when the cover came off her tank.

Of course, there was no tank, no smoke-filled room just a hospital bed in a hospital ward. Twelve months had passed since the landmine went off under the minibus, but Poppy knew nothing about that. All she knew, at this moment, was that Adam had somehow managed to shave off his beard and grow a moustache in a few minutes.

‘Did they get Alexander?’ asked Poppy in a sleepy voice.

‘Doctor Alexander? I think he’s gone for lunch, why, did you want him?’ asked Adam softly.

‘Why are you wearing a false moustache?’ asked Poppy, her voice becoming stronger,

‘It’s not false, I’ve had it for at least six months!’ snapped Adam.

‘And what’s happened to your goatee?’

Poppy was now becoming aware of her surroundings. She realised she was in a hospital bed which did not conform at all to her recent experiences. The nurse checked her pulse and adjusted the drip, feeding her arm with a bag of clear liquid.

‘Justine! I mean Angela! You’re alive!’

‘Well, yes. I was the last time I checked although, after this twenty-hour shift, I have had my doubts,’ complained Angela cheerfully.

It was now a good time for Poppy to take stock of what was happening. Obviously, they had taken her out of the tank and rushed her to hospital. That was the only possible explanation. She apprehensively raised the sheets with what little strength she had, to examine her charred, crinkly body, but that's not what she saw. Thin perhaps, even bordering on anorexic but pretty much flawless, almost as it used to be.

'The tank… it's healed my burns, completely!' cheered Poppy.

'Tank? You've had a few minor skin grafts but they've all taken well. You're a very lucky lady. It could have been an awful lot worse. Most people don't live to tell the tale after being blown up by a landmine,' explained Angela, the ward nurse.

'Landmine?' said Poppy, completely confused.

'Look after this young man. Come rain, come shine he's been here, reading books and magazines to you, even keeping you up to date with the soaps. Deserves a medal, he does,' said the nurse before whisking off to another needy soul.

'A year?' said Poppy, still completely confused.

'Yes, a whole year, near enough, in a coma, I've had to do all the talking, which makes a change! Every so often you teased me by opening your eyes for a brief moment, but you never really gained consciousness. I thought I'd lost you, but as long as that machine kept on bleeping with your heartbeat, I knew you were in there somewhere,' said Adam gently and lovingly.

'Coma?'

'Yes, coma! Don't you remember? You were on your way to Lusaka to do an outside broadcast. You were in a minibus, it went over a land mine, blew the bus to pieces.'

One-word questions were adequate but not searching enough, Poppy decided to break the pattern and go for a complete sentence.

'No, I arrived at Lusaka and was beginning the broadcast when I got sprayed with petrol,' maintained Poppy.

'From what I've been told, the minibus was blown apart, but you were thrown clear. Fortunately, it happened close to a waterhole where one of the locals was collecting water. Your clothes caught fire but they were quickly put out. In some respects, you were very lucky that day. You certainly weren't dowsed with petrol, definitely water!' explained Adam.

'But, but I can't have been in a coma. Are you saying I dreamt

everything: Madeline Bull, Barton, murderous Alexander, the Residents of Wardate?'

'Well, I don't think Doctor Alexander would appreciate the accusation and strictly speaking, you are a resident in **Ward 8**, but yes, you've been in a coma,' said Adam.

He realised that there could be many more misconceptions that would follow,

'I think you'd better tell me about your dream before you explode,'

'Dream? It can't have been,' insisted Poppy.

It took several minutes for Poppy to stabilise her thoughts and home in on the new reality, bombarding her senses. To be expected, the relief was overwhelming. What was evidently an elaborate dream had kept her mind occupied for a year and had been utterly convincing. She never particularly thought of the past months as a nightmare, but on reflection, yes, it had been. The betrayals, the assassinations, the suffering, the limitations of her android body and the loneliness of her strange existence. It had been hell on earth. However, it had also been one hell of an adventure.

Now, the thrill of the real world on her skin, in her lungs and hitting her optic nerves was causing sensory overload. Life was appreciated more than it had ever been. A cup of warm sweet tea, the first in aeons, was delivered by another nurse called Mabel, no doubt someone's Aunty. It was heavenly to Poppy's taste buds.

She was now ready to tell her story to Adam:

It was a very long story, after all, it had gone on for twelve months and was all inside Poppy's head. She described how she was so badly burnt that she was given a chance to become an android called Madeline Bull who turned out to be a sort of superhero. Her raison d'etre was to fight evil. The evilness was called Wardate, a society for the gathering of the most wicked, evil people on Earth.

The first member she encountered was a young Tara Gogli. He was responsible for burning her and hundreds of other people.

The next encounter with evil, was Raymond De Par, a psychopath who played around with deadly viruses.

The third was China White, better known as Osborne. He built deadly androids called HDU-4's which were programmed to eradicate all life from the Earth.

Finally, Aaron Alexander, the double-dealing, double-crossing, evil shit scientist.

It was an embarrassing moment: a young surgeon hesitantly approached her bed. Poppy squirmed in fear.

'Er, this is Mr Alexander, the surgeon who did the skin grafts. He's done an incredible job… Poppy's just come around,' said Adam, hoping he hadn't heard Poppy's untoward account of him.

'Double-dealing, double-crossing, evil shit scientist, eh? Well, that's a better description of me than I get from some patients,' said Alexander.

'She's had a bad dream,' said Adam, making excuses for her.

She continued to tell Adam about her incredible adventure, a dream, yes, but all the same, she lived it completely and vividly. The lengthy recount of her story was only interrupted for serious things like having a thorough check-over, being discharged, having a shower, getting dressed, applying makeup, doing the best she could with her hair and phoning her mother.

Adam was fascinated, he listened intently. Unlike most normal dreams where the memory of them only lasts for a few minutes, Poppy's memories did not fade. She continued to remember everything vividly. To her, it didn't seem like a dream at all.

She was advised to take it easy for a few days and use the wheelchair provided. Adam swiftly pushed her along the dreary corridors of the hospital. She encouraged him to push her as fast as he could, regardless of the risk. Desperately, she wanted to see the outside world with her own eyes, breath the outside air, with her nose and hear the sweet noises of life, first-hand on her eardrums. The corridors were lined with paintings, they all had a recurring theme and they were all painted by various British artists, after all, it was the Hogarth University Hospital. Finally, they were both seated in Adam's car, it wasn't a Volvo but that didn't particularly matter.

'Adam! There must be a thousand parking tickets here?'

'Three hundred and twelve to be precise. I've been meaning to do a clear out, just haven't had time. Just tread them down a bit.'

Poppy had only one request right now. She wasn't going to ask for it, she just hoped it would spontaneously happen. At last, they were alone together, no doctors, patients or nurses gawping, no smell of disinfectant sanitizing their feeling for each other. It was a perfectly quiet moment, the first for a while. The talking and laughing were put on hold for a while, now just looking and smiling at each other. Adam had been waiting twelve months for this moment. Poppy hadn't been waiting quite that long, but then, strictly speaking, she was someone

else and Adam was someone else.

Their eyes were first to make a concerted effort, deeply and directly they connected. The inevitable could not be hurried, but in no time at all, Adam's lips were placed delicately on Poppy's. Their eagerness for contact then unfolded. Poppy's hands gently touched Adam's cheeks and Adam's arms wrapped protectively around Poppy's shoulders. Neither of them was aware of the discomfort the handbrake lever and gear knob was causing.

'Well, we can stay here and talk, we can go to my place and… talk, or, being as it's a lovely day, we can go to a little beauty spot I know. We can have a coffee and a scone from the tea rooms and sit outside next to the river and talk. What's it going to be?'

'You know, a scone does sound rather tempting.'

By now, Adam had a rough idea of what had transpired in Poppy's entangled subconscious mind while she was in a coma. There were a few gaps, but on the whole, the events in Madeline Bull's life roughly followed the events in Poppy Cock's semi-comatose state.

Two lattés were on the table and the scones were buttered, creamed and jammed. It was time for Adam to begin his summing up.

'To be honest I think some of what you dreamt was fashioned on what I read out to you from the daily papers. You were absorbing certain bits and integrating them into your complex dream.'

Adam finished off his scone, emptied two sugar sachets into his coffee and then began.

'I told you earlier how you were injured – the minibus triggering a roadside mine. The explosion blew the vehicle apart, instantly killing Simon, Bob and the driver. Fortunately, you were thrown clear. It might not have seemed it at the time, but the angels were watching over you. Your clothes were on fire, you suffered multiple broken bones including a fractured skull and lost a hell of a lot of blood but…'

'I survived,' said Poppy, relishing the wonderful taste of her coffee.

'Yes, thank God. The blast happened right next to a waterhole with an elephant pump – that's what they call them, apparently. A quick-thinking local guy who was filling up with water at the time, pointed the leather spout at you, extinguishing your burning clothes. I assume you associated the water from the spout as the nozzle on the fire truck squirting petrol at you.'

'Typical, I mistake a good deed as something really bad.'

‘That’s probably because you were in such pain from the burns. Thankfully, most of them were only first-degree, but your other injuries, as I’ve said, were pretty serious. You were hastily flown back to England and taken to the Royal Hogarth Hospital where they put you back together.’

‘Well that certainly happened at least once in my adventure!’ said Madeline, casting her mind back to the enthusiastic American scientists.

‘Now I’m guessing here, but on the way to do your outside broadcast, did you see one of those automated minesweepers on the land next to the road – a sort of robot? I think that’s what triggered the overall android theme to your dream.’

‘Yes, now you come to mention it. There were a couple of them, entirely automated, trying their best to get blown up. Strangely, I almost felt sorry for them.’

It suddenly became appropriate to have a quiet moment, soak up the sun and sip their drinks while they were still hot.

Poppy broke the silence, ‘tell you what I do remember, the minibus going over one hell of a pothole, didn’t half bang my head. Everything went blurry and suddenly Bob and Simon grew halos.’

‘That must have been the moment when the van was blown apart,’ Adam reasoned.

‘What you’re basically saying then, is, I’ve been dreaming since Chapter six?’

‘Apparently so,’ said Adam thoughtfully.

‘The name, Madeline Bull, any thoughts on that, Sherlock?’ asked Poppy.

‘Well, it’s a good name if nothing else. Your subconscious is quite imaginative in coming up with Mad Bull. The evil Wardate society, whatever, obviously comes from the fact that you were in Ward 8 of the hospital.’

Adam took another sip of his coffee and eagerly continued. ‘Now, Tara Gogli, the person in your dream who squirted petrol over you, I typed *tara gogli* in the search engine and guess what came up? Actually, you’ll never guess. The minibus wasn’t by any chance a Toyota – a Toyota Tarago GLI was it? I reckon a piece of the minibus, probably the back door with the Tarago GLI logo on it, happened to land next to you.’

‘Incredible! It all seemed so real. Tara Gogli seemed real. A young

boy, that's all he was.'

'The person at the well who extinguished your burning clothes was a young lad. Typical! You owe him your life and you go and assassinate him!'

Poppy showed no remorse, after all, she wasn't going to show penitence for killing someone in a dream. Up to now, Adam was very happy with his progress in deciphering Poppy's dream, as was Poppy. He thought for a moment and then continued.

'The castle, Castle Colistin you called it, now this is very interesting. I assume this period of your dream was when you were being operated on. You were hours in the theatre having your burns and other injuries attended to.

'By surgeon Aaron Alexander, also the double-dealing, double-crossing, evil shit scientist… in my dream!'

'Yes, as you've said. You described the castle as being made of stainless steel with gas bottles built into the sides and a big bright light over the top of it. I reckon this was your interpretation of your surroundings when you were on the operating table.'

'Of course, yes it would be. There was cling film everywhere and a life-signs monitor on Gogli's desk with a pulse trace on it. I never gave it a moment's thought,'

'By the way, Colistin is an antibiotic drug,' added Adam.

'Get away!'

'Because you were open to infection after your skin grafts, they wouldn't allow any visitors. A pointless exercise really because you still went down with something they called *C-diff*. Then they go and move you to an isolation ward, so I still couldn't visit you, very irritating!'

'Sorry,' said Poppy, apologising as best as she could under the circumstances.

She knew Adam had missed her while she was in a coma, but equally, she had missed him. She recalled that it was well into the middle of her dream before she finally met up with her dream world Adam at his house. Of course, the wonderful moment was initially spoilt by a young woman called Jenny opening the door. Most probably it would turn out that somewhere in the hospital, there was another nurse called Jenny.

Poppy had a thought, 'That would be the period of my dream where I had to assassinate Raymond De Part, the mad biologist?'

‘Ray De Part, what a shrewd, perceptive mind you possess Miss Cock, even if you were in the land of the nod. You’re going to like this, I reckon when you were lying in bed in the isolation hospital you must have momentarily opened your eyes and glanced through the partially open door of your room.’

‘May have done, so?’

Adam continued. ‘Now just supposing that just outside your room, across the corridor was the X-ray Department, but you could only see part of the name, what would you see?’

‘Ray Depart! Well, I never!’ cheered Poppy.

The Adam in Poppy’s dream and this Adam were the same person, of course, they were, but each had diverged. The divergence started from the day of the accident and continued ever-widening. The Adam in her dream was from Poppy’s memories and had mutated as time went by into a measurably lesser person. Clearly someone she still loved but someone following in her ever-growing shadow. The real-world Adam had a mind of his own and was in no one’s shadow. Poppy recognised this fact instantly and decided that it was about time they sorted out this wedding so she could get on with having his children.

Adam continued with his analysis of Poppy’s dream. ‘After a few weeks you had the all clear but your lungs were in such a bad shape, you were moved to the High Dependency Unit, ward 4, better known as HDU-4, ring any bells? All manner of flashy medical machines were attached to you there, keeping you alive, making you better.’

‘That would be the time when I got enhanced, went blonde and put an inch on my waist.’

‘Right, anyway, I was allowed to visit you there. You never answered back, you never opened your eyes and you never moved, but I knew were inside there somewhere, I just had to wait.

Poppy spontaneously kissed Adam on his outstretched hand.

Adam continued. ‘Incidentally, there was a patient in the isolation ward, I believe you know his name.’

‘Mikael,’ said Poppy gently.

‘He died with the same bug you had. You pulled through, sadly he didn’t.’

‘Died with the bug I had… so true,’ said Poppy profoundly.

‘Well, that’s about it. Anything else you want me to try and explain?’ asked Adam.

‘There was someone called Roger Bennett. He caused a lot of trouble.’

‘Bennett… Bennett, it rings a bell.’

‘Bloody irritating bloke,’

‘The lung ventilation machine constantly followed you around. I’m sure that was called a Bennett; Puritan Bennett, that was it! Roger Bennett, Puritan Bennett, I suppose that’s close enough… Shall we try a little stroll?’ suggested Adam.

The mugs were finally empty, Adam’s scone still lay intact on the plate, but Poppy’s had been scoffed to the last crumb. It was by far, the most delicious thing she’d eaten in twelve months. Poppy was not keen on using her wheelchair, it had been left and forgotten in the boot of Adam’s car. Her weak, shaky walk, gradually improved as her joints and muscles became accustomed, once more to gravity and mobility. Poppy couldn’t help but notice the vivid colours of the countryside: green grass, deep blue sky and the vibrant colours of the wildflowers about her feet. She delighted in nature’s complex sounds, the trickling stream, the insects, birds and jet planes flying high above her. She took her shoes off and bathed her feet in the crystal-clear water, dashing in and out of the rocks of the river bed. She was entranced with things like perspective, distance and shadows, all working together to give a new sense of realism she had so missed. With the wonderful intoxicating smells of the countryside and Adam closely by her side, she was seriously in danger of getting high on happiness. At last, she now realised how wonderful life is and always was.

‘Okay, I’ve met Aaron Alexander but what about the other three scientists, they all seemed to play significant parts in my dream?’ asked Poppy.

‘They were the surgeons and doctors responsible for your recovery. Of course, you didn’t know their names, surprised you even knew they were there, to be honest. Somehow you knew you were in the Hogarth hospital so you applied other English artist names to the blanks.’

‘That figures. I didn’t know I knew so many English artists. It’s amazing what trivia your brain soaks up without you realising it,’ said Poppy.

‘When you were off the critical list and back in Ward 8, I could freely talk to you even if the conversation was completely one-sided. I must have told you their real names at that time. Consciously or subconsciously, you must have been listening. Doctor Poultney dealt with your fractures. As you know, Aaron Alexander dealt with your burns, Mr Barton was the chief surgeon and Paula Brownsword was

the plastic surgeon.'

'Paula?'

'Yeah, a right harridan of a woman.'

'Makes sense… and Angela?' added Poppy.'

'You saw her, she tended to all your needs. She bed bathed you, refilled the drips, watched over you, plumped up your pillows… If anyone deserves a medal, it's her. Never did find out her last name.'

'Fairy godmother, I'll think you'll find.'

'Hmm, Angela Fairy godmother, different!'

The sun was now setting, its light blasting horizontally through the trees in a blinding flickering dazzle as they walked along the undulating path. They lost track of how far they'd walked. They chose to sit on an idyllic rock protruding out of an idyllic piece of grass against an idyllic pool of still water. They imagined making love to each other.

41. The strangest thing

‘What would you like for breakfast tomorrow?’

‘Adam Manning! That’s a bit forward of you, isn’t it?’

‘If you think I’m going to let you out of my sight after twelve months of being on my own, you’ve got another thing coming!’

‘Well, as you’ve put it like that, a bowl of Porridge with a sprinkle of golden honey will do nicely,’ Poppy drooled.

‘It just so happens I’ve got porridge and honey in. I need some milk though. We’ll call in at Tesco on the way back.’

It was getting late and going dark although Tesco’s car park was lit up like a football pitch. Adam had a small food list forming in his head. Just a few items, it wouldn’t take long. Poppy decided to stay in the car and listen to the radio. Coincidentally, ‘Perfect day’ was playing again. She looked at herself in the vanity mirror behind the sun visor. She had almost forgotten what she looked like.

‘That’s strange,’ she thought, ‘I still look remarkably like Madeline.’

After a short while, competing with the music, an unexplainable metallic scratching, tapping noise moved progressively around her head. She turned up the volume. The tapping, scratching sound grew louder and closer. She turned the volume up even more. The car park was now almost empty, but in the distance, she could have sworn she saw someone who looked like Aaron Alexander – Mike Spencer, carrying a young woman over his shoulder across the car park. This had to be an illusion, a trick of the light, nevertheless the feeling of terror was tangible and wholly disturbing.

Poppy hadn’t noticed Adam walking back to the car. Not until the car door opened did her mind refocus with a snap.

‘Well, the strangest thing,’ related Adam excitedly.’ A young, very attractive woman, having a mental breakdown in there, all over buying a loaf of bread. Then suddenly this man loaded her on his shoulder and ran out muttering something on his mobile phone. You know, I could have sworn he said Madeline Bull and you know something else… it looked like Aaron Alexander!

It looked like Aaron Alexander.

It looked like Aaron Alexander.

It looked like Aaron Alexander…'

Adam's voice continued to reverberate while the dashboard surreally moved away from Poppy's legs into the far distance. She heard a whooshing noise and sensed a draft of cool damp air on her face. The sides of the car also continued to move out at an ever-increasing rate. This process continued until Poppy was all alone in one pool of brilliant light with no evidence of support, although she was secure. She wanted to stay, desperately wanted to stay, but although stationery, she was on a journey, a one-way trip.

Her last moments of consciousness had been serendipitous, incredibly wonderful and so very much alive.

One truly wonderful *imaginary* day and it had all taken place during the few minutes it took to remove the lid from her tank.

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Someone asked the question, probably a child: 'Why do we have dreams?' For once, the grown-up didn't know the answer. 'I think I know,' said the child, 'it's to stop us getting bored while we're asleep!'

There is nothing as certain as life but also there is nothing certain about life.

Other books by the Author:

The continuation of this saga:

Return to Wardate (second part)

Madeline Bull returns as the feisty android in this final instalment. This time Madeline faces her biggest challenges yet. The world is purposely charged with hatred and a new world war is on the horizon. Enter Madeline to thwart the dissenters and calm the world but there are far, far deeper concerns. For other reasons, the world is on the brink of obliteration, genocide is looming. Unknowingly Madeline has been modified and holds the key to saving the world – if she really wants to.

Ward off strangers (final part)

The saga of The Residents of Wardate concludes with Madeline Bull, the feisty android, returning to a world where people are disappearing in their thousands. This time she has to accept that she has finally met her match and there is no way out. All she can do is save everyone else and try to put the world back in order. The reward for her ultimate sacrifice is… Hope.

The fruits of Bohemia

Sheridan Banner has a remarkable gift, a gift of perception to rival all who have preceded him. However, his unique abilities are perceived by others as little more than an irritation, until, one day, an abrupt stranger happens to call. The stranger's name is Mark Watson. His father has disappeared along with eighteen other people. Amongst these eighteen people is Sheridan's natural father… who he has never met.
Sheridan is unaware that he holds part of the key to finding them.

Again

Two perfect people, Caban and Keeva, saved from a doomed world, have a very important job to do. 300 million years later absolutely everything rests squarely on their shoulders. It may well involve unimaginable sacrifices and dangers beyond imagination but to refuse the request of an alien, who looks like Caban's father, is simply bad manners. Caban and Keeva incidentally are Adam and Eve.

They say there's an explanation for most things in life. So just for a while, forget everything you know about everything and open your mind. All you really need to know right now is that a cheeseburger is the most underrated thing in the universe.

Kingdom of Queens

Grandpa has a pressing story to tell his twin granddaughters, but it is real or imaginary? He tells of an ancient Kingdom deep within the Patagonian ice fields, which is completely inaccessible and hidden from the rest of the world. This is as intended as it happens to be the home of all the surviving dragons. The fabled creatures now have only two purposes; to protect the people of the kingdom and keep the climate temperate with their fiery breath. Unfortunately, the survival of the Kingdom and the dragons are now seriously threatened. Grandpa is the only one who can restore the Kingdom to its former glory.

A dragon named Delightful (Kingdom of Queens)

The Queens, Tegan and Caron, have now settled in as rulers of the magical dragon Kingdom. Everything is perfect for a while, but one day, while the Queens are out for a morning run, an old evilness is disturbed. As a consequence, Queen Tegan becomes spiteful and tiresome with the Kingdom. She instructs Dragon Brathen, against her wishes, to take her home, back to the Netherworld. It is imperative that the rogue Queen and Brathen return, or the Kingdom will perish. There has to be a rescue mission…

The Author

In the third party? OK, whatever…
This is actually a picture of the author at his daughter's wedding, some fifteen years ago. From this brazen inaccuracy, you can conclude that the author is vain, not fully accepting the ageing process and blatantly deceitful.
As time goes by, there seems to be more things he dislikes than likes. For instance, He loves Marmite but hates olives, hates queuing and hates the phrase 'old-age pensioner'. Straight away an imbalance of 1 to 3… that just about sums him up.
To say which authors have influenced his writings may be admitting to plagiarism. Therefore, he insists his style is unique and innovative – even though it may not be.